



UNIVERSITY OF
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Exotic Dancers and Other Stories of Transformations

An Ethnographic Study in Swedish Strip Clubs



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ABSTRACT

The main question of this thesis is how in the social world of stripping the dominant order of symbolic values is renegotiated and exotic dancers undertake processes of transformation. The aim of the study is to look deeper inside those changes, and show how they are contextual to the reality in which they take place. The research has been conducted through participant observations and interviews with ten strippers in two strip clubs of a Swedish city from November 2014 to May 2015.

Dancers subjectivize themselves through a personal redefinition of dominant narratives. How do they relate to the public display of female erotica and what consequences do they face for breaking the accepted standards of respectability? Their projection of femininity is one based in the embodied imaginary of an 'exaggerated' working class femininity, and this sheds light on the performative nature of gender, and how it is marked by class. Furthermore, narratives about nakedness are also renegotiated: in performance the stripped body is naturalized and re-sexualized. Finally, strippers personally redefine bodily intimacy and accessibility.

The transformative potential of striptease is put into practice in the lived experiences of strippers, and, at the same time, it remains a 'potential' because it does not manage to reach beyond the segregated, 'abnormal' space of the club, into the performers' and audience's wider social worlds. I suggest that a feminist alliance between sex workers and sex workers' theorists is needed in order to overcome the stigma that surrounds striptease and to eventually liberate its subversive potential.

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Sara Pedri

Listen to your fears: they have a lot to teach you about yourself.

From *The Ethical Slut*, Easton, D. and Hardy J. W.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction 1

- 1.1. How Things Come to Matter 1
- 1.2. Research Aims and Questions 3
- 1.3. Positioning Myself 4
- 1.4. Outline of the Thesis 6

2. Design and Methodology 7

- 2.1. Fieldwork 7
- 2.2. Interviews 8
- 2.3. Methodological Procedures 11
- 2.4. Ethical Considerations 13

3. Existing Research and Theoretical Discussions 13

- 3.1. Existing Research and Literature Review 13
- 3.2. Theoretical Discussions and Definitions 18

4. Analysis 22

- 4.1. Work Conditions at the Clubs 22
 - 4.1.1. Work Orders in Pasha and Honeymoon 23
 - 4.1.2. Normative Orders in Pasha and Honeymoon 24
 - 4.1.3. Sentiment/Feeling Orders in Pasha and Honeymoon 25
 - 4.1.4. *“Clubs that are more dirty are always more fun”* 29
- 4.2. ...and Other Stories of Subjectivation 31
 - 4.2.1. Experimentations of (Female) Erotica and Stripped Standards of Respectability 31
 - 4.2.2. Playing Femininity through Gender Performances 38
 - 4.2.3. Playing Femininity through Class Performances 44
 - 4.2.4. Nakedness in Relation to Sexualisation of the Stripped Body 47
 - 4.2.5. Intimacy: *“You Set Rules for Yourself”* 52

5. Final Reflections 56

6. References 61

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Cagne Sciolte, a pack of reckless souls where I have been able to find, for the very first time, my feminism reflected in others.

To Gender Studies' classmates and teachers who raised me to be loud.

To Mathias and Giulia, who always had a brain to lend me when I lost mine, and who made me feel that 'it is worth it'.

To Claudio and his *Pornomanifesto*.

To my brother Riccardo, because we live together the joy and pain of every responsibility.

Mostly, to all exotic dancers who shared pieces of stories, anger, pleasure and all these *naked* emotions with me.

Title page picture:

Cajsa von Zeipel (b. 1983)

RABBIT, ELEPHANT, CRANE and TJEJSPYAN

Västerås Museum of Art, 2013

Photo: Bo Gyllander

1. INTRODUCTION

1. 1. How Things Came to Matter

In the summer of 2014 I moved to Rome for a few months and encountered ‘Cagne Sciolte’, a queer feminist collective. The group’s headquarters are located in a former strip club, one that was closed down for the exploitation of prostitution. The premises have been turned into the office, home, and base of a community of reckless activists and sex workers, who have personalized the space whilst keeping its former use recognizable: the poles, neon lights, and red sofas are still there. As well as providing a safe setting for workshops and discussions, the space has been used for pole dance classes where those taking part may attempt to redefine the notion of ‘intimacy’, challenge embodiments of gender, play with sexual desire and experience nakedness. Yet all these lofty experiences took place in a space carrying the memory of stories of the exploitation of women's bodies and sexuality. This raised the question, how did this inform our explorations there? The context, its shape, architecture and furniture all count towards a continuation of its history. How powerful were the residual patriarchal structures in the activities that we were doing? Why did I feel that our actions were ‘prohibited’, explorative, revolutionary and spotted with hints of guiltiness and pleasure, all at once?

I moved back to Sweden when its harsh winter arrived, and was still deep in the process of trying to organize my questions about the embodiment of femininity, sexuality and nakedness. I carried my embodied experience in Cagne Sciolte with me, and I recognized how much it had contributed to stimulating knowledge, or better yet, an awareness of my lack of knowledge. Thus, I re-entered the field by visiting Pasha, a strip club in Sandborg (a fictionalized name of a Swedish city).¹ I was evidently an unusual customer in the eyes of the dancers, who saw a young woman arriving, looking a bit lost in that dark place. In *my* eyes, I was actually quite a common customer: I went there with an irresistible curiosity about dealing with bodies, nakedness and sexuality. I did not find any answers, but the experience brought about an incredible amount of additional questions.

¹ All strip clubs’ names mentioned in the study are fictional, as well as my informants’ names and city names. I randomly chose the clubs’ names and the names of the cities, while the dancers’ nicknames were instead chosen by my informants themselves.

A common narrative circulating among dancers caught my attention. It was a narrative that every stripper faced in a unique way and from a specific position, but behind these infinite differences there was always a story of *transformation*. The dancers were talking about their experiences concerning changing expression of sexuality, play with identity changes, and the exploration of one's own body and identity. They were mostly not stories of awareness, but ones about exploration, resistance and change. My first point of curiosity was why these dynamics had been particularly available to them as exotic dancers, and available to me when doing pole dance classes in an exotic night club that had been transformed into a feminist space. What made strip clubs peculiar in this regard?

During my journey of research in strip clubs I came across topics that are often at the core of feminist discussions, and thus I started thinking feminism through striptease and striptease through feminism. I have noticed that, while I was trying to get to know the complex world of striptease with a gender approach, I went through a transformation process myself, which lead me to rethink matters of sexual health and agency through dance and the embodiment of femininity. I also started to question whether contemporary feminism and striptease push in a similar direction, in some senses. For instance, Loe (1999) documented a case study of a woman-owned and woman-operated sexual products business conceived during the women's movement in 1977, and proved that such a business could be defined as 'feminist' because it aimed at "extolling the virtues of the female body and masturbation" and enabling more honest sexual discourses, against penetration-centred narratives (Loe 1999:711). The question, both in Loe's case and in my own hypothesis about striptease, is can the business open new possibilities for bodies, sexual exploration and affirmation of the polymorphous perverse sexual self? If it can, *in which circumstances* can striptease be a transformative practice? Who does this transformation involve and reach?

To think about striptease in relation to feminism opens up new possibilities for feminist academia and communities to frame issues such as bodily intimacy, sexuality, nakedness, and the performativity of gender and class. How are these elements negotiated within a business that has a patriarchal basis, which is settled in a patriarchal society and that, as it happens in Pasha and Cagne Sciolte, simultaneously tries to fight against it?

1. 2. Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this project is to dig into the world of striptease, approaching it from the perspective of its transformative potential in terms of narratives about sexuality, femininity, nakedness and intimacy. This study will look deeper inside these experiences of change in order to unravel their potential, or lack of potential, for facilitating a powerful site of politics (and pleasure) both for the artists and audiences of striptease performances. My informants' stories are stories of resistance to the dominant order of systemic values and they trigger transformation in terms of deconstruction, exploration and expression of the self: it is a process of subjectivation. How is the self re-negotiated within such an inversion of the everyday world? I am curious to know how such transformations take place, who they involve and with what consequences. Which kind of *new* discourses does the practice of striptease enable?

My intention is *not* to think of striptease as transformative in itself, but present it as *potentially* transformative, because my empirically based findings indicate that neither exploitation nor transformative potential are general features of stripping. In this regard, I situate my research close to the works of Ronai & Ellis (1989) and Dodds (2013). The former studied interactional strategies used by exotic dancers to sell table dances and they concluded that, even if all employees in the business have the same goal of selling “turn-ons for money”, there is a huge range of diverse practices through which this can be accomplished (Ronai & Ellis 1989). After fieldwork experience with female strippers in two performance venues in London, Dodds (2013) claimed that: “yet the concept of transformation as a universal tenet of neo-burlesque striptease is clearly untenable” because the theoretical possibility of a performance that produces social change beyond the performance moment “is circumscribed by its contexts of reception and is limited to those who have access to the necessary economic, social, and intellectual capital to critique their cultural landscape” (Dodds 2013:87). Therefore, how are transformations differently experienced, and how do different bodies and backgrounds influence the process of change? Who is privileged in experiencing transformations?

Moreover, since striptease is rather contextual, I want to explore how such transformations can be understood in relation to working conditions, club's rules, dancers' visions of the profession, and how the wider societal and legal context deals with sex work. I embrace the research principle that Haritaworn (2008) employed in her study on interracial families in Britain and Germany from a queer diasporic point of perspective: in order to avoid a “disembodied, depersonalized fly-on-the-wall view

from nowhere” my present research aims to shape “an empirical project which takes seriously the question of positionality” and that allows me to directly “touch/interact/connect” with the protagonists of striptease practices (Haritaworn 2008:4). How do the strip clubs’ protagonists interpret, describe and experience the ways in which working conditions and legal issues are important in determining the transformations they live through striptease?

1. 3. Positioning Myself

Positioning myself within my research is fundamental because I agree with Haritaworn that a methodology of a research “only works if we know where we stand, where we are trying to go, and whom we are trying to take with us” (2008:11).

My research method of experiencing striptease by personally *doing it*, and at the same interviewing my colleagues and other dancers was a difficult position to handle. I have come to think of myself as a ‘feminist stripper’, because I try to understand striptease in terms of power relations and the politics of the practice, whilst also taking part in academic studies in the field of gender. These two positions, considered together, have sometimes been perceived as contradictory, even provocative. In my feminist network my ‘taking part’ in a system that is understood as reiterating women’s oppression has sometimes been seen as unjustifiable, even if conducted for research interests. By contrast, in the club some workers associate feminism with those who promote the Swedish approach to criminalizing sex workers’ customers, which reiterates stigmatization of sex work by financially and culturally punishing its users. Unsurprisingly, my presence was initially perceived with scepticism: “*Why are you here? What are you looking for?*” Jenny, a dancer, asked me during my second visit to her club.

I asked myself this question too, and I came to consider my deep-rooted doubts about the body. Why does it hold such significance for me? How many cultural inscriptions are marked upon it? I grew up in a school that, since I was six years old, forced me to sit down for eight hours every day, and I had difficulty keeping my legs still during lessons that I perceived as infinite. Since then, I have never stopped wondering how much this influenced my life as a whole, and how experiences shape possibilities or restrictions for bodies. These questions have been further complicated by issues of sexuality, which also came early in my life. I lived with this confusion for years, and then when I experienced exotic dancing, first in Cagne Sciolte and then in Pasha, everything got messed up again.

In the practice of striptease I found a great opportunity for rethinking the dilemmas of my life, and when I tried to explain this to Jenny, she laughed hard: *“welcome, so you are gonna have fun here!”*

My situatedness as outsider/insider and as ‘feminist stripper’/researcher noticeably impacted on my critical and embodied understanding of striptease. I was insider and outsider at the same time; from a research point of view because I am both the subject and object of my study, and in relation to the strip business because I stripteased with analytical purposes. My standpoint has been an obnoxious position because it made me face striptease with unstoppable reflections on the practice, and thus my experience was characterized by tormenting uncertainties. On the other hand, I had a privileged position within the profession because I am pursuing an education in gender studies, which makes me especially sensitive to power relations, and which partially helped me to exercise control over them. I had a privileged position also because I worked occasionally, usually two days a week, and given this lack of frequency in scheduling my shifts, I could more carefully plan my occasional performances on stage and also in private rooms. It was a parenthesis in my quotidian life, upon which I did not financially depend.

Finally, my position as a young, white, ‘normal-sized’, pansexual and sporty woman has been determinant in allowing me to be able to play with differentiated powers connected to what Dahl (2012), in her paper about femininity in feminist theory and critical femininity studies, defines as “competitive and hierarchical femininities” (Dahl 2012:58). In harmony with what Frank (2002) claims in her book about cultural and personal fantasies in the motives of ‘regular’ customers to male heterosexual strip clubs based on her experiences as a stripper in the US, I also believe that a “a feminist politics of stripping”, if it exists, needs to be grounded on the awareness that each dancer’s way of dealing with the profession cannot be dissociated from class, age, and racial hierarchies, “and as a result, what is playful to one woman may be painful or impossible for another” (Frank 2002:199-200). Therefore, ethical issues and matters of situating myself in my description of striptease practices cannot be separated from the analysis.

1. 4. Outline of the Thesis

In Section 2. ‘Design and Methodology’, I discuss how I conducted my fieldwork and interviews as well as which methodological procedures I chose. I then finally draw a rough picture of my main ethical dilemmas.

In Section 3. ‘Existing Research and Theoretical Discussions’, I discuss the work of the scholars who have previously studied sex work, stripping in particular, and try to situate myself in relation to them. Following this, I discuss theories, concepts and definitions relevant to this study.

In Section 4. ‘Analysis’, I first contextualize my study by describing Pasha and Honeymoon, the two clubs where I conducted my fieldwork and interviews, in terms of their work orders (4.1.1.), normative orders (4.1.2.) and sentiment/feeling orders (4.1.3.). I then add a descriptive section about what dancers mean when they state that “*clubs that are more dirty are always more fun.*” (4.1.4.) In the next sub-section (4.2.) I discuss how striptease can be understood as a *transformative* practice that encourages subjectivation through issues such as: redefinition of the standards of respectability that have been challenged by non-traditional sexual discourses (4.2.1), how narratives about femininity are de/re-constructed in terms of gender (4.2.2.), class (4.2.3.), nakedness in relation to the female nude’s sexualisation (4.2.4.), and revisions of the concept of ‘intimacy’ applied to the body’s accessibility (4.2.5.).

2. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

I took up dancing in one of the exotic nightclubs in Sandborg. I have been working twice a week for seven months, from November 2014 and May 2015, and spent that period collecting field notes. I have observed, occasionally worked in and indirectly experienced (through other dancer's stories) different strip clubs in Europe: London, Berlin, Budapest, Istanbul, and Rome. I informally interviewed customers, managers and other members of the staff, and conducted nine formal interviews with strippers from Pasha and Honeymoon, two male heterosexual strip clubs, both located in Sandborg. I conducted a tenth interview with Annelie Babitz, a dancer who published *Bakom den Nakna Huden* (2012; my personal translation in English: 'Under the Naked Skin'), a book detailing her experiences as a stripper.

2. 1. Fieldwork

I decided to personally engage with stripping as a research method: I went *into* the field in order to access what is traditionally considered a 'hidden population', and because I believe that the embodied experience of exotic dancing is not lascivious or a form of moral titillation, but it is a valuable mode of personal and professional knowledge. I worked as a stripper for seven months, twice a week, sometimes daytime shifts (12.00-20.00 or 12.00-18.00), sometimes nighttime shifts (18.00-24.00, 18.00-03.00, 20.00-04.00, 22.00-05.00, 22.00-06.00, 24.00-05.00, 24.00-06.00), in Pasha, Sandborg. I occasionally danced abroad, in Dollycats in Berlin and Danny's in Budapest as a 'guest dancer', which is a trial opportunity for aspiring future workers. I mostly spoke with dancers, though often with people employed by the clubs for other tasks, such as cashiers, cleaning staff, electricians, managers and bartenders. An important contribution to the research has also been provided by the customers through conversations I held with them during my working shifts or visits to the clubs.

When the working routine was slow, during afternoons and Monday/Tuesday/Wednesday nights (where only two or three dancers would be working in one shift), I could have in-depths conversation with the other workers, in which they would often speak openly about their feelings and experiences in the profession, because I had gained their trust as a co-worker. Although I did not expect it, I could be open about my research because most of dancers that I met felt the need to spread real

information about their working environment, as they felt it was socially misinterpreted from stereotypes born out of prejudice. Working on weekend nights was useful for observing the dynamics of what happens when there are up to ten dancers working together in the same shift. At these times, working rhythms are faster and there is a heterogeneous variety of guests visiting the club. Sometimes I went to Pasha outside my working shifts to gain a different perception of the space: with my clothes on and not bound to the dancing routine. I spoke English when I could, but sometimes I had to use my basic knowledge of Swedish, with customers and the club's staff, and Spanish, with a couple of the dancers.

As Bradley-Engen & Ulmer (2009) argued for their research, which was done through field observation of forty-nine strip clubs and fifty interviews with dancers on how the social organization of strip clubs contextualizes the experiences of dancers, the exact number of informal conversations is similarly difficult to assess in my project, "because of the difficulty in what constitutes an informal interview or observation" (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 2009).

2. 2. Interviews

My interviews were conducted between February 2015 and April 2015 with workers from Pasha and Honeymoon, located in Sandborg. I interviewed Carmen, Kate, Lucia, Didi, Alex, Elinor, Miriam, Amie, Caroline and Annelie Babitz. The interview with Annelie was different from the others because we spoke specifically about her book, (2012) instead of only discussing her experiences as a stripper, as I did with the other informants. All my informants preferred to be referred to with the pronoun 'she', thus this study focuses only on the area of (heterosexual) 'female' performance in striptease and it is constructed based on research about the representation of the 'woman's body' in striptease. I am aware that there are also 'boylesque' ('male' neo-burlesque), transgender and gay striptease scenes. I believe that gender is a social construction and, ideally, I would prefer to use a more gender neutral vocabulary to convey my questioning attitude towards gender. However, this study uses polarized definitions of gender because this is the way that narratives around it are generally framed and discussed within Pasha and Honeymoon. In fact, my informants did not indicate gender crossing or non-heterosexuality as specific areas in their experience of stripping.

I selected my informants by looking for heterogeneity in terms of their permanence in the business: 15, 10, 6, 5, 4, 2 years and 9, 6, 4 months. Three of my informants had to reconcile work with time for their children, three of them with university, seven with another, either occasional or more established, job. Their age varied from twenty years old to forty. Most of my informants worked in different striptease bars in Sweden and abroad: Greece, Denmark, Holland, Iceland, Norway, Oslo and the UK. I also tried to form a heterogeneous group in terms of age, body appearance, ethnic background, styles of interaction within the club, ways of dealing with the profession and coping with the stigma. I recorded my interviews in different locations, some in my flat, some in the clubs' dressing rooms, some in cafes or pubs. My informants were never afraid, as I expected, that our conversations would be too sensitive to be held in a public space.

I knew some of my informants personally because we worked together and with two of them I have a friendly relationship outside the club; this personal bond with them made me feel even more responsible for giving a faithful analysis of their speeches. Furthermore, it offered me additional instruments with which to understand their thoughts, even if the side effect was that they might have felt less inclined to expose themselves so openly, precisely because we knew each other personally beyond the bounds of a single interview. Moreover, some dancers might not have been willing to reveal their professional secrets and working habits to me. My dual position as researcher and dancer had a positive effect on the interview process through my familiarity with the language used by my informants and my understanding of the situations described by them in support of their thoughts (for instance, *"do you remember when...? It's like that time when it happened that..."*). Aware of my ambiguous position, I was very stressed during my first interviews because I was afraid of asking delicate questions about topics that are silenced within the club; I was afraid that my informants would perceive my position as a researcher as threatening if I was trying to access information to which I would not normally have access merely by being a colleague. My first two informants, both of whom I hosted at home (one for breakfast and one for dinner) showed personal interest in my project and offered support for my research efforts, because of the need they felt to talk about the profession to make it less of a taboo, and also because, as Lucia said: *"wow, it feels like I am expert in something! I did not know I have something important to say!"* Their reaction encouraged me to feel more confident in my next interviews.

I recorded the interviews with my PC and, once finished, listened to them again and coded common themes, in order to make a selective transcription of the relevant parts of the talks. The interviews generally lasted from an hour and half up to two hours, and given the informal settings and the fact that I was also a dancer, we spent some extra time exchanging opinions, tips and experiences that were not directly related to the aims of the discussion. This relaxed atmosphere released part of the tension I felt about my dual responsibilities as a researcher and co-worker; but at the same time I was occasionally afraid that the tone of the discussion would become too confidential or friendly to be used as a research material.

I treated my interviews with confidentiality and privacy, informed consent and transparency. The issues of confidentiality and privacy have been central in this study because of the stigmatized nature of striptease: most of the dancers that I have met hide their profession in certain environments, mostly to their families or in other workplaces; sometimes to the partner(s) as well. I therefore explained to my informants that I would use pseudonyms both for their names and for the city where their club is located, and that they would be able to decide to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason that I would not have to know. I struggled with the issue of privacy because one of the ethical dilemmas of research dealing with a topic as sensitive as personal engagement in sex work is the participants' possible emotional distress caused by my interview. I tried to avoid questions related to such matters that I perceived as particularly sensitive within the club, for instance financial issues, relations with colleagues, and personal professional routines in private rooms.

With regards to informed consent and transparency, I explained to my informants before the interview my curiosity about the topic, the hypothetical purposes, the use of the information collected on the field and the possible risks and benefits that my research could have on the group of strippers of Sandborg. I could not give specific information about the structure or main themes of my project because it was going to be structured on the interviews, and therefore detailed after and *in relation to* them. I ensured my informants that I would send them a draft of my project fifteen days before handling it in, so that they would be able to disagree with the project, ask me to delete their interventions or suggest modifications.

2. 3. Methodological Procedures

I position my project as a production of knowledge that emerges as a creation out of chaos (Grosz 2008). In fact, I started working as a stripper without a clear research plan; I was mostly motivated by strong but general curiosities about working with the body and sexuality. After three months of field work, in February 2015, I started collecting interviews but still did not have a structured project for my research. I prepared a list of questions for my informants about wide themes such as sexuality, identity, dance, body, and nakedness, and I tried to keep our conversations as spontaneous talks about the profession, rather than semi-structured interviews.

I have been partially inspired by the way that Jackson & Mazzei (2013) suggest using theory to think with data in order to accomplish a reading of it against interpretivism (Jackson & Mazzei 2013). What I took from their method is the decision to employ a methodology that helped me avoid being seduced by the intellectual desire to shape a specific, coherent narrative too early in the research process, a narrative bounded by themes and patterns, or centred on a specific subject that is supposed to represent the truth. Therefore, I used theories to think *with* ethnographic data (and also I used data to think *with* theory) striving to accomplish a reading of data “that gets us out of the representational trap of trying to figure out what the participants in our study ‘mean’” (Ibid.:262). Instead, the dancers' narratives were opened up to newness. I preferred to be guided by the information collected on the field, instead of handling them with a particular aim: I repeatedly listened to the interviews' registrations and then selectively transcribed those sections that contained common topics. I looked for difference in contents, but similarity in the significant matters that were discussed. Then, I selected the prevailing narratives that were also circulating among the dancers who I did not formally interview, but with whom I talked during my working shifts in Pasha or my visits to Honeymoon. I chose to focus on the themes that were also recurrent in my daily conversations with strippers because I wanted my research to deal with the topics that were of common interest to the people working in the business, in case that, they would be interested in reading my text and eventually feeling represented by it.

When I revised my field notes, I compared them with both the data and with my emotional memory, which influenced the process as a whole. One difficulty in doing this was knowing how to give a name to my feelings, making sure not to exclude them from my research as this would imply pretensions to objectivity and neutrality, and instead attempting to clarify *how* they impacted the work. Therefore, I am not claiming that my research is extensible to anyone else's voice, because I am

writing from my particular point of view and I am not accountable for other dancers' views on the profession. To talk about positionality "urges us to reflect on where we stand, to define our speaking positions and how they relate to others" (Haritaworn 2008:3). As many scholars have pointed out, especially Barton (2002), who conducted five years of research visiting clubs mostly in San Francisco, Hawaii and Kentucky, one's longevity in the industry significantly affects one's perception of the profession, and my experience in the field is small, timewise, compared to the amount of time spent in the profession by other Sandborg dancers, some of whom have worked for twenty years.²

The main methodological difficulty has been how to report the experiences of my informants: how can I faithfully use them in my analysis and in dialogue with the theory? What is my role and responsibility in the process? I tried to report how strippers described their professional experiences *to me*, since there is no such thing as a 'strippers' real description' of her experiences: the story will always be contextual, to the listener, to the space and time of its utterance, to the emotional state of the storyteller. Judith Butler's words (2005) powerfully exemplify the impossibility of giving an account of oneself: "in speaking the 'I,' I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the 'I,' since I always arrive too late to myself" (Butler 2005:79). Thus, in my research "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment", and not about a biased picture of stripping "promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility" (Haraway 1988:582-583). I believe that strippers are experts on their lives and they have agency to give fully accountable accounts of themselves. I agree with Wahab (2003), who wrote an article that reflexively engages the epistemological, methodological and ethical issues that surfaced during the author's participatory research with sex workers in Seattle, and concludes that sex workers experiences of stigmatization and marginalization encourage them to reach a deep level of analysis of the self and one's own life. The standpoint of those subjects who are subjugated to some kinds of power relations (strippers are victims of heavy stigmatization) are not innocent positions, as Haraway (1988) formulated: "on the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge" (Haraway 1988:584).

² According to Barton (2002), the dividing line between early-career and late-career dancers is three years, which coincides with dancers' descriptions of when the negative aspects of dancing begin to outweigh the positive ones.

It is, I believe, a feminist approach to research to put the subject of the study at the core of the study itself. A feminist and emancipatory methodology could be the one that gives birth to a form of knowledge in which the subjects of the study are relevant data in themselves. This knowledge would also come about as the result of joint work of the researchers, the subjects of the study and epistemic communities (Harding 1991, Bhavnani 1993). In fact, “participants are not merely raw, pre-theoretical sources of ‘experience’, but active producers of their own interpretations, which compete with those of the researcher” (Haritaworn 2008:4).

Therefore, the present study does not deal with the experiences of my informants themselves, nor with my interpretation of them: it is rather a dialogue on how my informants described their stories *to me* and how *I* chose to connect them with each other and the rest of the analysis. Conducted like that, my research is mostly posed a process of dialogue and temporary hypotheses that are negotiated between theory and striptease practices. Such hypotheses have been generated in the practical context of striptease; they keep evolving and become partially fixed only when I have to give a written account of what I have done. Thus, I read the present document more as a transitory picture of the current stage in my study, rather than as an effective representation of something that is actually an ongoing process of diffraction.

2. 4. Ethical Considerations

I approached striptease with a personal and deep-rooted research purpose, which goes far beyond the present study and yet is formalized within it. My interests in studying and performing striptease have variously transformed my life in the last eight months. It became a huge and totalizing research journey, because it leaked into my academic duties, into my personal process of growth, into my sport interests and even into my interpersonal relationships. It was difficult to handle the problems when they infiltrated one sphere of my life and threatened to take over it all. How then, was I able to handle the research? A relevant ethical issue has been to determine what should be part of the final written thesis and what should be left aside because it is too personal for me and for the dancers. It might asked, what counts as ‘too personal’ when I believe that *my* private is political? I think that this feminist slogan still holds validity. It was a bit easier to expose *myself*, but it has been difficult to decide what agency and responsibility I have in determining which observations to report from the field.

The choice of what to report and what instead to leave out of this paper has been connected to its consequences: what is the impact of this work on strippers' lives? I see conducting this research as an egoistical act: it comes from the curiosity of the researcher and is not, at least in its origin, requested by others. Even if I put considerable effort and passion into understanding the strippers' world, my being part of the group of dancers does not entitle me to understand their demands as a collective. Therefore, why should I feel any entitlement to talk about a field for which I am not fully representative?

My responsibility as a researcher has in fact been dilemmatic in positioning dancers within the complex net of power relations. Having a different body, class background, age and race significantly influence each stripper's way of entering, moving, thinking and finally telling me about her personal experience in the business. How can I faithfully report my informants' voices without distorting them and at the same time explicitly emphasize which privileged or disadvantageous standpoint they speak from? Even before this: how do I go about situating my informants in terms of what kinds of privilege they have, or do not have? This dilemma became particularly evident when I noticed that some of my informants did *not* position themselves in the same way I would situate them. For instance, according to one of the dancers I interviewed body shape and language do not affect how one deals with the profession: *"what matters is what you send out, and this is the same everywhere (in society). It is not about how you look, talk, it is only about how you feel about what you do."* How then can I position this dancer in relation to her situatedness in the business, when she has claimed that bodies do not matter? Am I failing in my aim of recounting my informants' experiences as they personally understand them? Am I patronizing the subject of my study and reinforcing the distinction between research and subject?

Finally, I consider how my questioning about striptease, embodied in the present research, is politically perceived. While on the one hand I hope to dismantle the inherent limitations of trying to find a position within the sex work debate, on the other hand I do not want to fall into the 'god trick' of objectivity: I can hardly think of a research project that does not make some political statement. My research is situated among those others (Dodds 1997 and 2013 in the field of neo-burlesque in the UK, Franks 2002a and 2002b in the field of striptease in the US, Liepe-Levinson 2002, a former stripper in the US, Ronai & Ellis 1989 who conducted auto ethnography in Florida) that aim to bring perspectives from the practical contexts of striptease into academia. In striving to achieve this, I got stuck, again, in the main ethical dilemma of this work: how to prioritize the version of strippers' experiences at they personally understand them and also to contextualize the position from which they speak?

3. EXISTING RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS

3. 1. Existing Research in the Field and Literature Review

My interest in the topic of striptease emerged from my readings of literature on pro-sex feminism. Pro-sex feminism mostly emerged in the US in the late 1970s, inspired by the previously white, middle-class, heterosexual claims around women's sexual needs and the related sexual revolution. Two polarized stances on the issue became evident in the Barnard Conference when Carol Vance, the spokesperson for the pro-sex side, called for a reassessment of the politics of sexuality:

“We must draw on women's energy to create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favour of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger. (...) The overemphasis on danger runs the risk of making sexual pleasure taboo. The result is that sexual pleasure in whatever form has become a great guilty secret among feminism” (Vance 1984:7).

Throughout the 1980s, pro-sex feminism clashed with radical feminism and with mainstream feminism in the US and across the Western world, and this controversial cluster of theories remains divisive within the feminist movement. The feminist sex war frequently debated sex work, either depicting it as an empowering experience or an exploitative one. Such discussions risk theorizing sex work as merely a symbol for a cause with the intention of using this lens to abstractly reflect upon the issues of sexualisation, objectification and sexual liberation. In quoting a sex worker, Barton (2002) similarly notes:

“When I read some stuff written by so-called ‘feminist allies’ it feels like they are fighting over our bodies. Some of them are ‘pro-prostitution’, as if it could be that easy. Then there are the others who say that prostitution is evil because it contributes to violence against women. (...) It's like prostitutes are just these bodies who are somehow connected to something bad and evil or something good and on the cutting edge of revolution. They just turn us into symbols” (Barton 2002:587).

I tried to approach striptease beyond these binary understandings of sex work as either denigrated or romanticized, and I attempted to dismantle the legitimacy of such a debate rather than finding a ‘third position’ within it.³ I rather position my study among ‘middle range’ theories that use empirical findings to explain specific aspects of sex work, as Weitzer (2000) concluded in the publication where remedial measures to overcome the deficiencies in literature on sex work are examined (Weitzer 2000:266).

Therefore, I connect my study with, and I have been inspired by those publications (such as Babitz 2012 in Sweden; Barton 2006 in San Francisco, Hawaii and Kentucky, Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 2009 in the US; Dodds 1997 and 2013 in the UK; Frank 2002 and 2002b in the US; Iman 2009 in Chicago; Regehr 2012 in America; Ronai & Ellis 1989 in Florida; Vance 1984 in North America, Wesely 2003 in Florida) that take into consideration the heterogeneous experiences of exotic dance as Barton (2006) describes them, in the article where the strip bar is described as a volatile and unsettling space for performers. Barton talks about oppression and empowerment as elements that “follow each other with dizzying swiftness” (Barton 2006:42).

I prioritized the literature based on fieldwork, interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic work, such as Babitz 2002 in Sweden, Barthes 1957 in Paris, Barton 2006 in San Francisco, Hawaii and Kentucky, Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 2009 in the US, Chapkins 1997 in the US and Netherlands, Dodds 1997 in the UK, Frank 2002b in the US, Liepe-Levinson 2002 in North America, Ronai & Ellis 1989 in Florida, Spivey 2005 in a mid-Atlantic strip bar, Wesely 2003 in Florida. This choice is motivated by my research aim of discussing striptease in a practical context in order to understand how the transformative potential of striptease practices is influenced by the clubs’ regulations and working conditions, and the dancers’ approach to their profession.

Moreover, all the above listed literature is specifically about striptease, or neo-burlesque in relation to striptease. I preferred to read material on striptease in particular, rather than on sex work in general, because, while it is politically useful to talk about sex work as a wide professional category (the exchange of sex or sexualized intimacy for money or something of ‘value’), analytically strip clubs are workplaces that represent a peculiar category. Nevertheless, even if the study does not aim to

³ For instance, Chapkins (1997), who conducted more than fifty interviews in both the US and the Netherlands with women performing erotic labour and sex work, argues that the debate can be categorized into three positions: radical feminists, sex-radical feminists, and feminists who are arguing for a more complicated position on women in the sex industry.

discuss sex work in terms of prostitution it still analyses sexualized practices as they are enacted in strip clubs, whether as peep shows, lap dances or table dances.⁴

Most of the research based on empirical data about striptease has been produced in the American context, while ethnographic European material on sex work mostly deals with sex work in general or with prostitution (street prostitution in particular), though there are some notable exceptions to be mentioned, as for instance Dodds (1997 and 2013) and Högström (2004). In the Swedish context academic work on striptease is particularly lacking, if not entirely absent. I was only able to find one study about the Swedish striptease scene, it is written by Högström (2004) and questions whether exotic dance can be viewed as a typical female job in Stockholm. Concerning publications outside academia, there is Annelie Babitz's book (2012) and Jensen's story (2008) about her time as a Swedish dancer in clubs in Denmark.

Finally, both in the American and the European contexts the *academic ethnographic* material is hardly ever done by researchers who have done striptease themselves.⁵ Therefore, the research written by strippers or former strippers (Dodds 1997 and 2013 in the field of neo-burlesque in the UK, Franks 2002a and 2002b in the field of striptease in the US, Liepe-Levinson 2002, a former stripper in the US, Ronai & Ellis 1989 who conducted auto-ethnography in Florida) gave a valuable contribution to this work. Their publications guided me in handling the position of being simultaneously object and subject of my research.

Also, I value the authors' personal knowledge *in* the field as a rare resource: it is difficult to get knowledge about sex work, because it is a highly stigmatized field where information is unlikely spread to outsiders. Strippers possibly have restraints in telling their experiences to those who do not inhabit the practical context where it takes place as means of self-protection against discrimination, stigma, and possible lack of a common understanding. In fact, stereotypes surrounding sex work could lead the researcher to filter information in a way that acts only to affirm their previously held beliefs. The Young Women's Empowerment Project, which is a "member based social justice organizing project that is led by and for young people of color who have current or former experience in the sex trade and

⁴ Table dance is an erotic dance consisting of a striptease that includes the unclothing of the breast's or/and the exhibition of genitals. Often it is performed with a pole and it does not imply any physical contact with the audience. A lap dance also consists of stripping off the clothes, but it is done by sitting on the customer's lap. In peep shows the customer can commit auto-erotic acts, while the dancer dances or performs auto-eroticism too.

⁵ Even if this is hard to assess because sex work is a stigmatizing profession. It could happen that sex work researchers have also done sex work themselves, but they do not make this explicit in their academic work.

street economies”⁶ denounced that: "We would share the same stories over and over and we would still be shocked when we read their reports. No matter what we said to the researchers, their reports always said the same thing: we were victims who needed police and social workers to save us" (Iman et al. 2009:20).

Another reason why sex workers’ experiences are rarely translated into academic publication has been explicated by Dewey & Zheng (2012), who wrote a volume that “addresses key ethical challenges faced by anthropologist who study sex work” in which they denounce the marginalization, silencing and exclusion of the scholars who brought sex workers’ voices into academia and prioritized the version of workers’ experiences as the workers themselves understood them (Dewey & Zheng 2012:xi). Exclusion, usually from abolitionists, is due to the fact that this methodological approach is interpreted as a political act: “On more than one occasion, social scientists have been accused of serving as apologists for behaviour that abolitionists gloss as ‘trafficking’ by engaging in research with sex workers and presenting their findings on sex workers’ terms” (Ibid.:8). The final result is that knowledge on sex work ends up circulating only informally among sex work researchers, instead of being published. My research is situated among those studies that aim to bring perspectives from the practical contexts of striptease into academia.

3. 2. Theoretical Discussions and Definitions

At the heart of this study lies the idea of teasing: dancers tease customers, exotic dance performances tease gender, nakedness teases standards of respectability, and theory really teased me. The theoretical literature took part in this study as a series of processes rather than as concepts because they mostly worked as troublemakers, by infiltrating the fieldwork’s material and provoking my analysis. Intersectionality was with me from the beginning, while subjectivation with performativity, as interrelated threads, and respectability came later to shake, to provoke my thoughts generating chaos and newness. I worked with unstable research subjects and theories-on-the-move invaded my project “in a process to diffract, rather than foreclose”: theories were “plugged-in” to stimulate the dilation of my thinking to its limit (Jackson & Mazzei 2013:264).

⁶ <https://ywepchicago.wordpress.com/about/> From the section “About” of the blog of Young Women’s Empowerment Project.

Intersectionality functioned as a perspective that allowed me to look at how the subject's social identities affect one's own experiences of gender, class, race, and how they interrelate and dynamically influence one another.⁷ In my research this is translated into an understanding of the strippers' social location as reflected in different intersecting identities, in which power relations are inscribed. In fact, intersections generate both subjection and advantage: in Pasha and Honeymoon issues of class, gender, race and age shape a privileged femininity. What I find most enlightening in such a perspective is that, as it is argued by Shields (2008), within discussions about intersectionality as a central tenant of feminist thinking, subjects are not "passive recipients of an identity position, but 'practice' each aspect of identity as informed by other identities" and it can thus be asked: how do dancers 'practice' their own subjectivities, by taking their different identities into account (Shields 2008:301)?

Whatever answer arises from this question it must involve transformation because strippers inevitably renegotiate their identity positions within a context like the strip club, where social locations are differently defined than they are in the wider societal discourses. In this study, I position the subject (the stripper) in a process of transformation in terms of subjectivation through performativity; a hypothesis inspired by Butler's (1997b) return to Althusser via Foucault's notions of subjectivation, and the political (Butler 1997a, b).

Foucault (1990) defines the individual as constituted in discourses through disciplinary power's technologies and practices of the self. This means that the *productive power* indeed shapes and transform the subject, but it does not determine it entirely: "there are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscious self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 1982:212). In the author's understanding (1988), subjectivation consists of the process through which the person is rendered a subject ("obtains the constitution of a subject") and, at the same time, is subjected to relations of power through discourse, "which is of course only one of the given possibilities of the organization of a self-consciousness" (Foucault 1988:253); these two dynamics characterize the transformations of exotic dancers described in this study. Judith Butler (1990) uses Foucault's definition (1982) of discourse as productive to develop the notion of the performative of the sexed, gendered and I add, in relation to this study, 'classed', aged and racialized subject. Considering Foucault's account (1988) of subjection, together with other Althusserian theories, Butler (1997b)

⁷ In the present study I define identity as the social categories to which a subject claims membership, and this depends also on the personal meaning that is given to these categories (Ashmore et al. 2004).

claims that “subjectivation’ (...) denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection. (...) Such subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally *acts on* a given individual as a form of domination, but also *activates* or forms the subject. Hence, subjection is neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction *in* production” (Butler 1997b:83-84).

‘Discursive agency’ is, in Butler’s account (1997a), the capacity to name and therefore *constitute* that results from subjectivation. As such, if agency is discursive, it is not the attribute “of an *a priori*, rational, self-knowing subject, but *retains* a subject who can act with intent” (Youdell 2006:519). This study will use the concept of subjectivation, and implicitly of subjection, in relation to the process *of becoming*, or of transforming, undertaken by exotic dancers. Striptease is interpreted as a process of contact (awareness, challenge, struggle, expression, *transformation*) with one’s own inner emotions, sexuality, body and identity altogether. Striptease is a power and discursive agency that both *acts on* dancers as a form of domination, but that also *activates* the subject that can act with intent. Even if I did not make inquiries about how precisely my informants think of subjectivity, what is relevant for this discussion is how it is transformed within the practice of striptease.

The concept of ‘performative politics’ (Butler 1997a) grounds a post-structural politics of change because it is a practice that troubles and eventually unsettles (teases!) normalized, predominant discourses. This means that performative subjects engage in a deconstructive politics that destabilize hegemonic meanings. So it must be asked: who are the performative subjects in striptease, when it is understood as a practice that can revise hegemonic narratives on nakedness, bodily intimacy, sexuality and femininity? Moreover, the dominant constitution of the subject can be self-consciously frustrated through the discursive practices of subjects who are themselves subjectivated. Is it within this possibility of creating subjectivation beyond dancers’ lives that the transformative potential of striptease’s performative politics resides?

One of the powers that *acts on* (as a form of domination), but also *activates* the subject, is the societal standard of respectability. This study embraces in different sections the concept of respectability as Skeggs (2011) intends it: as the result of the relation between two groups where one has the power of judging, and the other struggles to resist this.⁸ Resistance is inhibited because respectability standards

⁸ Beverly Skeggs (2002) applied the concept of ‘respectability’ to her studies on working class women in 1980 in the UK, see: *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. I have found her theoretical claims applicable to my research too, and take responsibility for eventual incorrect displacements of her work.

are 'constitutive': identity is often the method by which many groups establish their public credibility, but since this process relies upon visibility, which possibilities do strippers have to gain a recognized and visible identity (Skeggs 2011, minute: 39:45-42:00)? If it is the case that strippers are misrecognized as having no value or respectability, it finally becomes self-governance and self-persecution that works at the level of intimate subjectivity. In relation to sexuality, respectability is one of the key ways in which women in particular are impelled to invest in the values, judgments and standards of others (patriarchy), and when the standard is broken as in the practice of striptease, dancers risk feeling guilty, ashamed, inadequate and isolated (Ibid., hour: 01:05).

4. ANALYSIS

4. 1. Work Conditions at the Clubs

Dancing is not static; it is a journey that occurs over a changing landscape of experiences and significant changes in perception.

Barton 2006:40

Giulia Garofalo (2014) points out, while addressing controversial social policy issues on prostitution in Europe, that if discussions about sex work either consider sex independently to work or the other way round, they fall into simplistic descriptions of striptease as either empowering or oppressive. As a dancer at ‘The Lusty Lady’ in San Francisco affirmed: “They are not exploited just because they are exotic dancers. It has to do with the club that is fucked up, the management is fucked up; they are not getting their tips. (...) We are not exploited just because our job is to sell pussy!” (From the documentary *Live Nude Girls Unite*, minute 45:20-45:47)

The focus on practical organizational and managerial practices within strip clubs is fundamental to put forward the hypothesis of striptease existing as a resistant practice in a real context. In order to avoid the critique that “questions of power struggle occur at the level of theory rather than within a social and historical reality“, my intention is to specify which environments dancers of Pasha and Honeymoon work in, and how this informs processes of transformation (Dodds 2013:82). I organize the description of the Sandborg clubs using the model formulated by Bradley-Engen & Ulmer (2009) to analyse how the social organization of a strip club contextualizes and determines dancers’ commitment to their job. The two authors observed forty-nine strip clubs in the US and grouped them into three typologies using the ‘processual order perspective’. This has been used to guide data collection and analysis in research in disparate fields with specific focus on social organisation and structure, without losing sight of the ontological importance of human agency and interaction processes. The central assumption of this perspective is that "interaction processes and their resulting outcomes, or orders, are crucial to the development, maintenance, and change of institutional organisations" (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 2009:32). Thus, the social order of an institution is situated in and through the interactional

processes that shape it. Bradley-Engen & Ulmer selected three of the many orders individuated by Strauss (1993) to outline an analytical scheme “of a society in action”, which are the same ones that I use in my analysis: work orders, normative orders and sentiment/feeling orders.

4.1.1. Work Orders in Pasha and Honeymoon

The first basic feature of a club is its work orders, which are given by its practical and logistical organization: the geography of the club, the earning methods, the schedule of the shifts and its opening hours. Pasha and Honeymoon are both located in the city centre and they have similar earning methods. In fact, workers have to pay a stage fee each time they work, from two hundred up to four hundred kronor (from twenty-one up to forty-three euros) in order to be able to temporarily ‘rent the space’. After that initial sum, all the money that they earn in private shows is entirely their own income (after taxes), but there remain some additional fees in case they use certain ‘special’ rooms or if they drink champagne with the customers. Dancers do not earn anything but small tips from their shows on stage, which take place every twenty or thirty minutes and are done in turns by one worker at a time. Since show tips are a negligible part of a dancer’s profit, their incomes essentially depend on how many private shows they sell, and for how much, as each dancer can arbitrarily fix the price for the services provided in private rooms, with the only clause being that they must respect a minimum price.

Workers can refuse to provide certain services or to serve certain customers. Services go from peep shows to lap dances, table dances, slave rooms, and champagne rooms. Prices differ between daytime and nighttime, but generally the cost of a lap dance/table dance or peep show ranges from five hundred to one thousand kronor (fifty-four to one hundred and six euros) and it lasts two songs (seven, eight minutes), unless the customers wants to buy a second one. Slave rooms and champagne rooms are more expensive, regularly ranging from three-thousand to six-thousand kronor (three hundred and twenty up to six-hundred and forty euros) and the time spent ranges from thirty to sixty minutes. Most of the customers in Pasha and Honeymoon opt for lap/table dances and peep shows, while the champagne and slave rooms are much less frequently requested. Private dances can last longer and can involve more than one worker, or be for more than one customer at once if guests are willing to pay double. Since all salary depends on how much a dancer can sell, each worker has a very different final

income.⁹ To 'loyalize' regular customers, who are not hard to find in Pasha and Honeymoon, is one of the dancers' strategies for a more secure daily profit.

In terms of booking schedules, dancers indicate the shifts they are willing to work at the beginning of each month, and they are free to choose whether they want to work for only one day a year or almost every single day. The club's manager then tries to match all preferences in the schedule. There are two workers in the daytime shifts, from three to six/seven during Monday, Thursday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday nights, while on Friday and Saturday night shifts there are around ten to fifteen workers. The clubs are open from 12.00 pm until 5.00 or 6.00 am; the entrance fee for the customers is around one thousand kronor in the daytime (ten euros) and this doubles in the evenings. Included in the payment of this entrance fee, customers are permitted access to some spaces that the dancers cannot enter: porn cinemas, swingers clubs and small rooms where customers may engage in sexual interactions among themselves. These spaces are located next to the clubs, connected through an internal passage but also accessible from the outside. There are cameras in every room of the club, there is no selection process for the employment of new dancers, and selling alcoholic beverages higher than 2.5% is not legal in strip clubs in Sweden.

4.1.2. Normative Orders in Pasha and Honeymoon

The second group of orders described by Bradley-Engen & Ulmer (2009) is the normative one, shaped by formal and informal norms and practices. First of all, normative orders depend on who are the protagonists of the scene, in terms of the dancers' physicalities and life stories. They are mostly women in their twenties up to their forties, even though it is not rare to find dancers in their fifties, mostly Swedish and Swedish second generation immigrants, though it is also common to find 'guest dancers' from abroad who are used to temporary work in different countries, and switch after a few months or even weeks. Many dancers in Pasha and Honeymoon have also previously worked abroad or they still occasionally do for a couple of weeks a season. There is a frequent turnover of dancers, but most of

⁹ According to SCB (Statistiska Centralbyrån_Statistics Sweden), in 2012 the 'låg medianinkomsten', low medium income, was 278 000 krona, the equivalent of twenty-three thousand, one hundred and sixty-seven a month, (which is a bit less than two thousand five hundred euros). My hypothesis that a stripper's income can be much higher than the national low medium average is calculated on the assumption that a dancer could theoretically work full time and the price for a private show of less than ten minutes ranges from five-hundred to one thousand five hundred krona, so from more than fifty to more than one hundred and fifty euros before taxes. Therefore, even if the income of a dancer is unpredictable, with these working hours is highly possible that their final earning will be higher than the national average.

them switch from one club to another, instead of quitting the profession. Otherwise, they would stop for some months, to then come back again. It seemed to me that a sort of slogan was repeated by lots of the dancers that I met: *“once you start stripping you can’t stop. You get used to this amount of money, and when you try different jobs you’ll always think that you do not get paid enough.”*

Pasha and Honeymoon mostly have regular customers who have been hanging out in the club for years, even decades; some of them have a ‘favourite’ dancer, others will buy shows from different workers each time. They are usually Swedish men, from their forties up to their seventies, and they might typically visit the club every second month, or every week, with some even attending every day. New customers generally visit the club with friends on the weekend, or they are tourists to the city; often they do not come alone, as is usually the case with the regular guests. My general observation is that the turnover of the customers is particularly high only at the weekend, when the age of the guests varies from eighteen up to sixty. There are not many female guests, some couples, and some transsexual people.

The management is composed of men in their fifties. They visit the club almost every day, but my impression is that the level of supervision, at least on the dancers, is low.

4.1.3. Sentiment/Feeling Orders in Pasha and Honeymoon

Finally, a club is characterized by its sentiment/feeling orders, which refer to the affective climate of the social world, or the emotions experienced during interpersonal relations between participants. What are the dancers’ perception of their position in society as strippers, their descriptions of the atmosphere in the club, and their attitudes towards other dancers?

A primary consideration of a stripper’s standpoint is their being stigmatized. I did not take it for granted that dancers inevitably have to deal with this, because such an unquestioned claim itself would be a stigmatizing assumption. Nevertheless, after some time spent in the field I could definitely make the assertion that dancers are victims of stigmatization. The majority of dancers I met in my fieldwork and interviews stated that they have to hide their profession in different spheres of their lives Didi’s words function as an example of this:¹⁰

¹⁰ An exception to the common pattern of strippers’ keeping a lid on their professional choices to their family, other jobs and partners, is friends, who often have enthusiastic reactions to strippers’ professional choices. Caroline told me that sometimes, when she is introduced to new people by friends, her friends will say: *“this is my friend I was talking to you*

“It is so hard because I am always afraid that people would find it out. In my regular work (...) it would just be the worst thing. It is about the whole thing, family friend. I am paranoid. People have the wrong image of the strip club and then they would think that I am fucked up, junky, and whatever. I think it is horrible. It is too bad that I cannot say that in my daily work, but I can’t. It is a big part of me, and I have to hide it.”

One other voice from the interviews tells that: *“I met my chief editor once in the club (...). I got fired after that, because of that.”* Another case exemplifying the stigmatization of working as a stripper is the story of Annelie Babitz who received, after publishing her work, heavy online abuse and death threats, mostly based around slut-shaming: *“just because I wrote a book about my profession, and because I am a journalist. A journalist is not supposed to take her clothes off and dance!”* Moreover, I have noticed that strippers are well aware of the debates that surround their profession and read them as stigmatizing. As Carmen says:

“I have read an interesting book called ‘Politics of Piety’ and it was about Muslim women being commiserated. And there was this anthropologist, she made a study about female Muslims in Egypt; they were like: ‘why are you objectifying us, with our scarves? We are subjects. We want to be subjects. Just do not tap on our heads and say this is not you, some men forced you to do it.’ (...) It’s the same discussion actually with strippers, two different worlds but exactly the same thought made by who talks about us but does not know us.”

Moreover, stigma is codified in institutional practices too: in Sweden, strip clubs are legal, but in practice it is difficult for dancers to be legally recognized as such. Since strippers work as independent contractors, they need to register for a personal VAT and buy a portable credit card terminal through which they can receive payments and till receipts. However, not all banks will accept credit card terminal contracts to companies (företaget) entitled ‘stripper’ or ‘dancer’. Once this machine is (eventually) bought, too high profits cannot be made from one single customers, or in one night, because the Swedish tax Agency (Skatteverket) might suspect acts of prostitution.

Personally, I experienced stigma in having to hide my profession to my parents, while I could be more open with friends, even if it took a long time to answer to all their questions, and sometimes to

about, the one that works as a stripper!” I relate such ‘proud’ behaviour of strippers’ friends to the spread of the “Striptease culture”, which romanticizes the profession as glamorous, modern and politically irreverent (McNally 2002).

their indirect provocations behind their need to ‘protect me’ (*“should I come with you to the club, so you can feel more safe?”*) or their being worried for my moral and psychological integrity (*“but how do you feel? Does this make you happy?”*). Moreover, I was curious to observe reactions to my stripteasing from strangers who live in Sandborg. Therefore, I subscribed to a dating application where I could chat with new people. It was interesting to observe that most of them reacted with attacks or subtle violence when they asked me what I do in life and I answered that I am an exotic dancer: *“I’m not gonna judge but...I think it’s a bit weird.”* / *“I have never been in a strip club, but I think it is fucked up.”* / *“Sorry, but I don’t think we share the same ideas about life. Goodbye.”* / *“You must be superhot! Would you also strip for me in private?”*

Many of the hopes about transformations that dancers expressed during their interviews were related to resisting the (internalized) stigma that leads to competition and judgemental behaviours among co-workers. This happens because the remuneration of the job fully depends on how many shows are sold; so one could feasibly end the working shift with no money at all. Often the stress brought on by this threat is displaced onto other dancers: “the social order in the clubs creates a paradoxical environment in which dancers are both controlled and controlling” because the conflict is displaced from discussions about the club’s rules that do not ensure a minimum wage to other dancers’ behaviour (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 2009:53). Maybe, this is also one of the reasons why Pasha and Honeymoon do not need a high level of managerial supervision.

The club’s rules are not questioned because it is difficult to think of alternatives to the system of the stage fee. There are clubs where it does not exist, but these usually take percentages from the girls’ earnings in private dances.¹¹ All the dancers with whom I spoke evaluate the percentage system as an exploitative one because stage fees are usually perceived as unfairly high; in Noutstad, Sweden, for instance, clubs retain 80% of the workers’ earnings. With the stage fee system the club does not employ workers but treats them as occupying the space, renting it out as ‘independent contractors’. This status denies them workers rights. As it is explained on the Exotic Dancers Union Alliance webpage:

¹¹ In some clubs, as it was in Dollycats in Berlin, dancers are paid a minimum wage for every working day (in Berlin, forty euros), regardless to how much they sell.

“‘Independent contractors’ are not covered by the laws that guarantee workers with ‘employee status’ the right to unionize. (...) Exotic dancers across the country [California] have been filing class-action lawsuits against their ‘employers,’ for illegally calling them ‘independent contractors’ and denying them the rights and benefits (like wages, workers' compensation insurance and the right to organize) they should be entitled to as employees.’”¹²

Another element of competition in Pasha and Honeymoon, where the management do not earn anything from the workers' private dances, is that there is no control on the prices that dancers set in private rooms. This creates fights among dancers who are afraid or suspect that ‘some girls do more for less’, which is perceived as damaging to all the workers because minimum prices would then decrease and dancers would feel the pressure of having ‘to go beyond the limits’, *“to go further than I do normally”*.

“At weekends there is so much competition! I would feel a bit dirty because I would have to go further than I do normally, I would talk more dirty, have to get closer and guests’ hands would try to be everywhere and I would not feel comfortable. That is why I never work on weekends: it is too much pressure. If it would be the same on weekdays I would quit [working as a stripper].”

As it emerges from the quote above, such a competitive atmosphere as well as a more eclectic and depersonalized working routine, is more typical in Pasha and Honeymoon on Friday and Saturday nights. The various opening hours on different days of the week correspond to specific atmospheres that are created by the customers that clubs attract in different shifts and by different dancers' working styles: *“I think it gives more connection with the customers during weekdays’ nights, while weekend nights it is more hectic, it is like ‘sell, sell, sell’. You cannot express yourself in a way that you want to. (...) I am not there to sell sell sell, I wanna dance, make connections, enjoy myself and take it easy and relax.”*¹³

¹² <http://www.bayswan.org/EDAunionLL.html>

¹³ Despite the shared preference of working when the atmosphere is perceived as more friendly, a lot of my informants still work on weekend nighttime shifts due to organizational matters or financial reasons.

4.1.4. “Clubs that are more dirty are always more fun”

“The clubs that are more dirty are always more fun. Because there you don’t have to sit in long dresses, drink champagne, and you do not have to be sweet and cute.”

Among the dancers I had contact with there exists a shared preference for working in clubs that look like “dirty cellars” or “punk rock clubs”, rather than glamorous and fashionable ones, because of the more relaxed and friendly atmosphere: *“It is more dirty, no social hierarchies!”*

Clubs of this kind, like Pasha and Honeymoon, allow private shows with contact between strippers and customers in lap dances: tips on stage are small; customers do not often buy champagne; clubs are opened from midday every day of the week and are connected with porn cinemas or swingers clubs. They are financially more accessible than luxurious clubs and there is no selection procedure for candidate dancers. It is not rare to find dancers in their forties, there are regulars who consistently visit the club, there is a low level of managerial supervision on workers and they are highly stigmatizing places for the people who take part in them. Their furniture tends to be old; and they contain fixtures like billiard boards and gaming machines. Finally, there are no strict outfit and behavioural rules, for instance, regulations about wearing professional clothes, using make-up, eating chewing gum, or using mobile phones: *“[In sophisticated places] you have to be in a certain way, they have very narrow ideas about what a stripper should look like and behave like. Pasha is instead much different; you can go without make up and still feel beautiful.”* This description contextualizes my analysis of Pasha and Honeymoon as working class environments, where pretensions of constructing a sophisticated environment are abandoned:

“I like working in these dirty places, in a cellar or whatever. My first club was one floor down to a video store and it was so dirty. But I like these environments, I don’t like the glamorous and shit. I feel like I am a dirty girl so I only like dirty clubs! I do not feel so perfect, but rough and dirty.”

As shown through the excerpt above ‘dirty places’ are also less pretentious in terms of respectability: they are instead “dirty”, “cellars”, “rough” rather than perfect.

Which kind of femininities and class identities are conveyed in these “dirty clubs” and which idea of intimacy and attractiveness exist? Are norms less restrictive? Even if Elinor stated that in her club, *“strippers all look different. Everything goes. Customers like different girls”* and similarly Alex: *“they [customers] want to see something different, and we are all different in the punk rock clubs”*, these claims have to be problematized in terms of how respectability and norms about sexuality, femininity and nakedness are renegotiated, not only lessened.

Also, customers witnessed that they like ‘*their club*’ (it is noticeable the use of a possessive pronoun to talk about the clubs) because they ‘feel at home’ by going there regularly for a coffee in the afternoon and to relax. This cosy atmosphere allows customers and dancers to get to know each other; as Kate noted: *“I know so many of the customers. Sometimes there could be three four men sitting around stage and now I know them all in different ways so I can really play. I can express.”* Kate discussed her freedom to express and play when she works during the day, suggesting that she feels she has some kind of personal bond with the customers, who respect and admire her. Didi had a similar opinion, adding that the mutual trust between dancers and customers is generated by the fact that they know each other in a non-normativized way, because a dancer is actually more likely to remember the sexual tastes of her customers than their names. This environment, Didi explained, is created during the week: *“It is more ‘freaks’ during the week, because people know what they want when they come in (...) and it could be very personal and unique. In the daytime is perfect, you know everyone there: the jeans guy, the kinky guy, they know what they want and I know it too.”* It is connected to the feeling of being in an ‘honest environment’, as Carmen stated: *“in a raw sexual environment that is so honest that you really get friends for life there.”* In ‘dirty places’ there exists a feeling of community between dances, staff and guests that is generated by the need to create a supportive social network, where they can all resist the stigma of inhabiting such a place; this also explains one of the reasons why customers refer to Pasha and Honeymoon as ‘*my club*’.

4. 2. ...and Other Stories of Subjectivation

I find the excerpts below, each coming from a different interview, representative of how dancers experience stripping as a step into a process of subjectivation beyond social conventions. It is experienced through ‘*exaggeration*’, ‘*free expression*’, ‘*showing different sides of myself*’, ‘*honesty*’, ‘*sexual me*’, ‘*side of myself that comes out*’, ‘*be yourself*’. These narratives were common in my fieldwork as well, and I have been fascinated by the question of how they intersect with each other, and which effects they generate.

“I am a little bit more ‘extreme’, [in the club] exaggerated. (...) I love the extra me.”

”Kate (stage name) is much freer! She is a free exhibitionist always happy. Free expression of the self and she is not afraid of anything. (...) Just showing different sides of myself (...). Sometimes I bring Kate outside, but XX (real name) is always inside the club. She is too big. I can never get rid of that!”

“Maybe I do not show too much of myself when I am in the rest of the society. I cannot show the whole part of me. I am more honest in the club. It is mostly about the sexual me.”

“I have this side of myself that is exhibitionist that comes out when I work.”

“Stripping make me know myself faster because there [in the club] you feel more free to be yourself.”

4.2.1. Experimentation of (Female) Erotica and Stripped Standards of Respectability

Frank (2002b) writes that “the strip club, in many ways, is a good place to disobey” (Frank 2002b:189). My perception is that Frank’s description of strip clubs is a shared perspective among my informants, who reported in interviews that when they are not in the club they can hardly express their sexual subjectivity, even though this is described as fundamental part of the self. As Didi witnessed: *“I am*

nearly sexual in my office work because I am like...flirty. But it is a hidden thing. I have always been a flirty person, I have had this since I was really really young, since I was eleven years old, it was always a part of me, I always felt sexual.” In their life outside the club the informant’s sexuality is misrecognized and self-silenced because it can lead to judgments, social exclusion and stigmatization. Moreover, sexuality remains unexpressed because there is the risk of not respecting the boundaries of those people who might be receiving one person’s sexual inputs without asking for them, nor wanting them. Alex’s words are indicative of this concern:

“In the club (...) I leave myself out sexually, I show myself off to feel sexy and feminine in a more direct way. I always considered myself as having sexual energy in my life but I do not want to be that straight on with people that do not ask for it. (...) but in the club I can leave it out because people wanna see it. (...) People want to achieve your sexual energy and you just give it, but do not give it to people that do not want it! This is a problem in our society, because we tend to give our sexual energy to the wrong people.”

But what makes the club such a peculiar environment in terms of expressing one’s own sexuality, compared to other social settings? Annelie, Caroline, and Kate, as summarized in the following quotes, recognize that since the striptease performance is the “physical display of women taking ownership of their sexuality”, as Regehr (2011) defined American burlesque performances in the study on a reality show where women sought empowerment through sexualized dance, it is a behaviour that breaks the standard of respectability ascribed to female bodies (Regehr 2011:139).

“Women are allowed to be sexy in there (clubs)! But then if you take this outside (...) you are gonna be slut-shamed, because it is about the male power.”

“Women are not supposed to feel free and feel empowered. We [as female strippers] are breaking some kind of traditional rules. (...) We do not fit in where they want us to fit in.”

“It is not that by being a stripper makes me powerful, but accepting my sexuality and using it makes me powerful, of course. And people are scared of that!”

How do Annelie, Caroline and Kate rethink what is ‘proper’ in relation to their sexuality as women, strippers and subject part of a wider socio-cultural context, when they break social expectations regarding female erotica? How do they re-subjectivize themselves?

“By choosing to take her clothes off for money, a woman steps outside the spoken and unspoken rules for appropriate gender behaviour” and for this reason she ultimately does not have to conform to the sexist double standard associated with “conventional sex roles” of power either (Barton 2006:62). Similarly, Liepe-Levinson (2004), who wrote about the shut-down of strip clubs in 1990s New York to defend stripping against canvassers of American puritanism, argues that in strip shows female dancers are engaged in “social transgressiveness” in terms of gender because they “play desired sex-object roles as they openly defy the expectations of the double standard” (Liepe-Levinson 2002:4). This occurs because “dancers can develop a critical perspective on masculine privilege and female subordination and deconstruct power relations” by unpacking the fantasy of male protection over women’s bodies and sexuality, and by stripping off their clothes and sexuality in public (Barton 2002:62). It is a process of deconstruction of respectability and power relations that does not only involve dancers, but also the customers, who break societal expectations and standards of respectability merely being part of the strip business. What it is at stake is that people who partake in the social world of stripping resist norms by inhabiting a place where the double standard traditionally adopted to understand gender is challenged, and where there is a community built around such a deconstruction and consequent stigmatization.

Therefore, once these people have the embodied feeling of partaking in a system that escapes traditional standards of respectability (and is for that reason highly stigmatized) they feel less bounded to respect the rules that are at the root of the discrimination against them. Strip clubs become places where sexual fantasies can be more easily expressed than in other social settings, because there is less pressure to fulfil the standards of ‘respectability’ and anonymity is guaranteed by the community and by the mechanism through which: ‘I cannot say that I saw you there, because it would mean I was there too’.¹⁴

¹⁴ Nevertheless, experimentation might be refrained by the club’s rules and physical space; for instance, certain clubs have a strict list of services that are accessible and nothing is possible beyond them. In other clubs services must be delivered only in one standardized way, or the space does not allow for alternative approaches. For instance, in Danny’s, Budapest, and also in Dollycats, Berlin, private dances take place in an open room, with thin curtains or transparent decorations in between customers’ seats, while in Pasha there are private rooms, divided by walls. If a customer asked a dancer, for instance, to make loud sex-related sounds in Danny’s or Dollycats, everybody in the space would hear, so this is less likely to occur. The clubs’ encouragement to experiment through its regulation and architecture might, on the other hand, correspond to a reduced freedom for dancers to deny requests. In fact, the wider the informal range of feasible services is, the more pressure is put upon the dancers who are not willing to go beyond the services on club’s ‘menu’. For instance, Danny’s has rooms where it is possible to buy sex (‘sex’ as the act of male to female penetration), but most of the dancers do not use them. Despite that, customers know about such a possibility and exercise insistent pressure on all dancers, even if they tend to refuse.

Thus, the community that circulates in Sandborg strip clubs is characterized by a direct approach to sexuality and a general affirmation of it, at least within the space itself. As clubs' electricians and cashiers (who have access to the camera system in porn cinemas and swingers club) have witnessed, it is not rare for customers to perform both homosexual and heterosexual acts within the club, while they would describe themselves as strictly heterosexual outside it. Dancers similarly reported: *"If you're in your fifties and you have kids and married of course you feel shameful, it is difficult to be honest and open with themselves and their wives when taking dances with strippers, getting blowjobs from other men or disappearing with transsexual girls. It happens a lot [in the club], it's a queer environment!"*

In such a "queer environment" customers can express their non-normalized sexual desires. Dancers are in fact used to receiving requests from their guests that overstep the standard services written in the 'menu'. To list just some of them: to lick my feet, to fake a naked wrestling fight, to watch a peep show where I should play with a banana, to have a table dance where I only dance on the floor, to slap the guest in the face during a lap dance, to buy my used underpants, to being showered with my urine, to massage my feet, to look at me while I comb my hair. These requests only step outside strippers' standards of 'respectability' if the customer attempts to get such a need/lust/fantasy fulfilled without paying any additional cost. Occasionally a dancer would evaluate the request as immoral: in most of these cases I have observed that dancers have refused to behave or look like children or animals. Elinor told me: *"I am not here to feed paedophilia, I think this stuff is just disgusting"*. Otherwise, I noticed a process of normalization of the proposal itself: *"I did not get many strange requests from customers...or better, I can't remember them now. It is like, it gets normalized because then you tell this stuff to people outside and they freak out, but without this kind of reaction I don't even think about it."*

References to 'freedom' and 'honesty' in terms of the expression of sexuality and experimentation were popular narratives in my interviews, not only in relation to the customers, but also from the dancers' themselves:

"When you come to a strip club, you switch on your primitive brain. (...) The superego disappears and the 'id' comes out. [As a stripper] you deal with people's primitive thoughts and sexual fantasies and of course you switch on this kind of brain too (...). That's why it is so honest and raw. I think it is very honest the environment there. It's the primal force of sexuality."

In the dressing rooms, discussions, jokes and tips about sex are common among dancers. In fact my very first impression of the backstage atmosphere was highly indicative of the norm: it was my first visit to the club and Guenda, a dancer who was working that shift, showed me around the premises and explained the rules. We went into the dressing room, she took me to the toilet and removed her tampon while I was still standing in front of her, listening to her advice about dancing whilst wearing high heels. She showed me her new style of pubic hair cut. I was therefore not surprised a few months later when my informants discussed how their approach to sexuality was opened up by the mere fact of inhabiting such an environment: *“we get more comfortable with exploring our sexual bodies when we work in that environment and talk a lot about sex. Like celebrating the pussy!!”* As Siri also claimed: *“I think it empowered me, like just being around girls that are like connected with their sexuality.”*

Dancers are not only open with each other sexually but they reclaim their sexual needs with the customers too, by finding a compromise between their own desires and the guest's needs.

“I think you should try to meet them [the needs of dancers and customers] halfway and both will be happy. I have hardly found customers' fantasies disturbing; normally it is not so much disturbing anyway because I also have very weird fantasies in a different way so...who am I to judge? Maybe it is not easy for me to go there but I can try anyway. Or just see it as a game, like...it's a challenge.”

As Kate witnessed above, by trying to provide 'alternative' services strippers are encouraged to experiment. Amie similarly reported: *“One day a guy wanted me to pee on him, and I actually have done it! Just to try, this is not really my thing but I can do it if he really wants. It was fun! Here [in the club] it is easier to try things that you normally think you would never ever do.”*

This explorative attitude is partially what allows for a constant redefinition of the concept of sexuality (and subjectivity) within the space, for both dancers and guests. In fact, within this, the reformulation of the concept of 'sex' can be displaced from the individual to a wider level. The ample range of practices that can possibly be done in strip clubs challenges the idea of sex as merely male-to-female penetration, and I believe that this also therefore challenges definitions of prostitution and sex work in general. This raises the question: is striptease sex work? What is the difference between striptease and prostitution? Lucia, during our interview, reflected upon the object of the financial transaction in striptease: *“Here [in the club] the first feeling was that I felt like a whore, selling sex or*

some kind of sex. For me sexuality is not only the physical sexual connection, there is a sexual environment there so I feel like I'm selling my self in a sexual way."

Lucia's statement recalls and supplements the question presented at the beginning of this sub-chapter: how do dancers rethink what is 'proper' in relation to their sexuality, as strippers? Amie told me about her initial confusion about her feeling sexually satisfied after a working day:

"A thing that I have discovered is that if I did not have sex for a while and I go to work my needs are fulfilled by the attention and sexual energy that I give out and the sexual energy that I get from the look, compliments, staring, dance or whatever. (...) It works! It's like having sex and still I don't. (...) It is not negative. It's not disappointing; there you get fulfilled in a different way."

Until now it has been discussed in terms of how dancers deconstruct the standards of respectability associated with female sexuality, and how the environment of the club encourages sexual experimentations and a redefinition of sexuality itself. Taken together, these dynamics imply a significant step in the process of subjectivation of the dancer. Caroline, for instance, explained that she started feeling better with herself when she accepted her being 'a sexual being': *"if we get more open-minded about sex I think that more people would accept the fact that we are sexual human beings, we just have to accept it and open ourselves, because if we don't we have this hatred toward people that are open about their sexuality."*

An additional question to be asked is which kind of sexuality is enacted in the club, and how the sexuality enacted relates to the subjectivity of the dancer. Speaking of which, Amie stated:

"This job is different from others. It is about sexuality. It's still your sexuality. You can do whatever you want with it. If the customer tells me: I just wanna see you from behind in the pussiering [peepshow] and then I cannot come from behind, I have to turn and I do not give a fuck about what he said. Why should I not come? (...) What is important is that you always enjoy yourself."

In Amie's experience sexuality is interpreted both as something to be expressed (because, as a woman, it is liberating to do it in public) and according to modalities chosen by herself. At the same time, as

Amie said, “it is still *your* sexuality”: the possessive pronoun in relation to sexuality exemplifies what I have found in many of my informants’ narratives, thus that there are double dynamics of a ‘stripped’ and then ‘recovered’ sexuality. For many of my informants the possibility of displaying and expressing female erotica is one of the main reasons why they first entered and later stayed in the profession: they (we) share a need for deconstructing the limitations imposed on (female) bodies. At the same time, they do not take ‘too much’ of their intimacy into the space. It is indeed an experimental place, but it does also reconstruct its own limitations:

“I do not want to get turned on by customers because I have to make that separate, that is very very important. (...) I do not like customers being able to make me horny. I want to keep that for me. There, I am a different kind of horny. Well, not a different kind of horny but I don’t want to get turned on by customers because there I do not wanna cross the borders. I do not think that everyone deserves your true horniness. The idea of horniness is fine, but the inner horniness, your very true one, no, I don’t wanna give it away.”

Carmen does not ‘wanna give the real horniness away’, because there are still “*borders*” to not be crossed, and I wonder what do these borders mean in the process of subjectivation, what do they do and who sets them? Barton (2006) wrote that “sex work forces women to establish boundaries to help them to manage social expectations about proper femininity” (Barton 2006:70). In fact, the stripped body’s potential for resistance to the ‘proper’ sexuality assigned to female bodies is restrained by the fact that the standards of respectability are ‘constitutive’ because a subject that is as victimized by the standards of respectability as exotic dancers, is constantly misrecognized as having no value, personally or in relation to their profession. As such, “those who cannot use identity as a resource (...) cannot make any public subjective display of worth” and the trap is that they have no alternative sources of dominant normative orders (Skeggs 2011, minute: 39:45-42:00). Thus, they end up with no other possibility than striving to fulfil the external standard that positions them irremediably at its limit: this explains why dancers do not radically deconstruct ‘properness’, but they instead displace its standards a bit ‘further’.

In fact, dancers would often create distance between themselves and other dancers by reclaiming respectability standards and using these against each other through spreading misconceptions about ‘the bad stripper’ or ‘bad practices’. In doing so they are continuing to judge themselves according to the standards of another group, as the external standard of respectability is not refused but displaced onto other strippers. In the clubs where I have conducted fieldwork, the practice

of striptease is resistant to certain norms, but it is not radically transformative with regards to the deep-rooted governmentality and self-persecution coming from pervasive standards of ‘proper femininity’. It is thus a real feminist challenge to make out of stripping a moment of refusal of respectability. Such an action of resistance may concretize the transformative potential of striptease: it would mean to take further the rethinking of those political claims for recognition that rely on performing (any kind of) respectability that are *already questioned* in the clubs, but then re-affirmed.

In a practical sense, what is my responsibility? As a theorist of striptease, I strive to identify, imagine, think and understand “other ways of being and doing person-value” within (and, why not, *beyond*) the context of striptease (Skeggs 2011, hour: 01:08). As a stripper, I think that the idea of the good, respectable, bourgeois and capitalist subject limits our imaginary and, as groups of dancers, we need to think beyond this.

4.2.2. Playing Femininity through Gender Performances

The hypothesis that exotic dancers in ‘gentlemen’s clubs’ break standards of respectability in relation to the expression of their sexuality is strongly connected with issues of gender. In fact, when strippers shatter and then reconstruct standards of being respectable, they do it in relation to their status as feminine subjects. The main reason they are not defined as respectable individuals is because they make use of their sexuality in public *as women*. Moreover, narratives about femininity declined as gender performance are intertwined with discourses of class, age and race, which are together re-defined when standards of respectability are not met. This dynamic of transformation that involves various factors has a key role in the processes of subjectivation that dancers go through in their ‘doing’ femininity.¹⁵

One Friday night, in between the daytime and evening shift, I was organising my personal locker when Delicia erupted into the changing room. She furiously ripped off her usual orange lace baby doll and borrowed Emilie’s long latex suit. She also chose a push up bra, without answering my questions about

¹⁵ I here identify gender as a ‘doing’, which is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.” (Butler 1990:24-25)

her working day. Then, she covered her usual opalescent make-up with an exaggerated, heavy, black eye-shadow. She used a black eyeliner to paint her lips. She asked me for a pair of scissors and shortened her fringe to the middle of her forehead. I was impressed by her sudden change, both physical and emotional: after the rapid process of transformation she smiled to me and said *“I am so deadly tired of being seen as this sweet girl. I am not sweet girl, I am not innocent girl, and people don’t get it. But now they will see that I am the dark queen, forget my angel look. Nice to meet you, here is a witch, a woman who captures, here is Eva.”* She pirouetted and shook my hand. I have never seen her like this. It seemed to me a wild and unscheduled rite of passage. What was behind her new name and look? What did this transformation mean?

As Dodds (1997) observed, and as it is valid for Pasha and Honeymoon, “striptease operates as a complex site of performance that enables opportunities for transformation in the realization of female display”. In fact, strippers’ experimentations pass through enactments of various ‘femininities’: Delicia/Eva transformed from the ‘sweet ‘girl’ to the ‘witch’ (Dodds 1997:86). As Nally (2009) formulated in the study about contemporary notions of neo-burlesque and the consequences of its politicization and popularization, “the stage becomes a reflection of the postmodern premise that we are all composited of various identities”, and so strippers perform according to the peculiar reality of the moment with elements of gender, race, age and class variously involved (Nally 2009:634).¹⁶ Transformations in the realization of female display are not only encouraged in the club, but are in a way inevitable because stripping is intrinsically a transgression of female virtue “by making public what is properly private” and “this disobedience and the inevitable stigma of dancing cancels out the option simply to be girl“ (Frank 2002b:179). The practice of striptease becomes transformative and resistant because it inevitably requires a conscious and creative “reflexive masquerade” that Frank defines as a form of doing and subverting girl (Ibid.).

¹⁶ As the expression ‘exotic dance’ itself suggests, ‘various identities’ in the club are played out on the field of racialization. In fact, certain backgrounds are strategically manipulated to establish relations with customers: *“Swedish men love exotic pussies!”* In this way, stereotypes related to sexualisation of the racialized subject ground workers’ strategic declaration or falsification of their background: “dancers read racial preferences much like they do with a client interest in breast size or legs: an information they can manipulate to make money” (Barton 2006:14). Workers use racialization not only strategically, but also to give sense to their reality within the club: for instance, ‘Mediterranean girls’ are better at interacting with customers because they are sociable persons, and ‘Latina’ women are always the best and wildest dancers. Moreover, age is a relevant factor in the strippers’ construction of their subjectivity as ‘feminine subjects’: at which age does a dancer stop being feminine? How are bodily signs of aging culturally interpreted in relation to the stripper’s femininity?

Following the use of Butler's theory of the performative (1990), behind the performance there is not a real and defined subject who selects which cultural constructions to wear, but rather the subject *is produced* by the performance while the dancer re-produces the feminine ideal: "performativity involves not a distinct, identifiable 'self' playing a role, but a mutually constituting relationship between subjects and the roles that they play" (Pendleton 1997:82). Therefore, dancers' embodiment of femininities is strictly intertwined with the deeper process of subjectivation: "you can take a stripper out of the nightclub, but you can't take the nightclub out of the stripper" (Ibid.). These experimental experiences are strong, because when embodied in clothes and make up, enacted in dance, bodily movements and in approaching other people, there are immediate forms of social feedback. Carmen is a representative example of such an explorative behaviour in terms of gender. She understands her work as an occasion to approach different kinds of femininities:

"When you work you go through different kinds of femininity. I have had a period when I was actually playing very dumb, just for the fun of it. You know like a stupid doll. What do you call this kind of femininity? And then I tried to be very very clever and make money out of my mind instead of my body and then I tried being (...) very primitive, sexually and kind of vulgar primitive, more mysterious (...). You will see: the role you take is not gonna be the same forever. You will try different roles, you will want to try."

I am curious about where these femininities come from, according to dancers, and what my informants mean by the concept. I noticed that self-representations as feminine subjects performed by dancers are usually built upon cultural fantasies: when Carmen was playing "very dumb/like a stupid doll" she was the 'bimbo girl', when "very clever" she became the 'girl next door'; while when Delicia was "vulgar primitive/mysterious" she was 'bad girl', as Eva became. The embodiment of such cultural fantasises both depend upon the mood of the dancers in that particular moment and are also tactical, in the sense that the performance is chosen because it will more likely succeed in attracting customers.

What characterizes these representations is that they appear more like replications than realities, because they do not exactly conform to the fantasy. The gap between the traditionally ideal image of sexy femininity and the concretization of it presented by dancers is the space where workers' creativity produces personalization: "stripping is far from being simply an individual manipulation of sexy images but it is a social process of testing and exploiting the boundaries of gender and appearance" (Frank, 2002b:183). Another common pattern that I have found in Pasha and Honeymoon is that these

replications are characterised by excess: “[in the club] I am a little bit more ‘extra me’. Exaggerated a little bit, more, yeah, exaggerated (...). I love the extra me.” In fact, a stripper’s look is often overdone in makeup, their clothes are bizarre and their heels disproportionately high, their hair is incredibly long and colourful hair, and they have often had cosmetic surgery. Catherine Waggoner (2005) in her study on the emancipatory potential of feminine masquerade in Mary Kay cosmetics interprets the ‘aesthetics of excess’ as that which can be mistaken for conformity to patriarchal codes of femininity, but instead actually shows how they are messed up: “exaggerating the code of patriarchal femininity, they illuminate the performative nature of the code of femininity, suggesting that womanliness is a mask that can be worn or removed rather than a natural essence of women” (Waggoner 2005:263). The exaggerated performance of femininity goes hand-in-hand with a presentation of heteronormativity, and this can also be interpreted as an act of exposing the heteronormative order’s constructedness. Stripping, read in this light, has a transformative power that renders the codes of femininity and heteronormativity visible through exaggeration, and thereby resists them. Pendleton (1997), while discussing queer theories in relation to sex work, summarized this hypothesis with the provocateur claim that sex workers fuck with heteronormativity.

In Budapest, I met Wutta, a dancer who talked about feeling nostalgic for certain normative images of female bodies and behaviours that she finds difficult to enact in daily life, but that she can embody, *exaggerate*, and play with in the strip club. According to Wutta, her acting ‘extra feminine’ is not a position of mockery or parody of the original referent, but expresses her respect and affection towards it, as she strives to reappropriate it. Nevertheless, she did not want to export this image of nostalgic femininity outside the club because it is an imaginary that, when carried by a female body, can be easily interpreted as an unquestioned reiteration of a ‘patriarchal imaginary’. Moreover, by adopting an intersectional point of view, social condemnation of a woman’s appearance is more likely to occur when the reappropriation of a certain imagery is practiced by a (female) subject who also works in an industry, like sex work, that is seen as being a constitutively patriarchal system: “when you are a stripper, it is better that you avoid looking like a stripper.” As Kate noted: “I am proud of being a stripper, but if I call myself ‘stripper’ all this unwritten stuff comes with it. So I usually call myself as a dancer, and artist.”

My observations in Sandborg clubs correspond to what Ussher (1997) discovered in her quest to find the sources of feminine representations and to identify what shapes women's symbolic images of sex and femininity: dancers who play femininity at the same time recognise the 'fragility of the facade of femininity', and this allows them to develop a particular sensitivity in the handling of their performances. I have observed that dancers strive to find strategies that allow them to fulfil their desire of appearing in 'a feminine way', while also trying to deal with the wider social and political context. In fact, by performing extra femininity, not only do they run the risk of being discriminated against, but there is also the possibility of reiterating unachievable standards of beauty that oppress women and that is not available to who cannot financially afford it or that have a body, class background, race, age or social position that irremediably preclude them from fitting such a strict standard of femininity.

Many authors (Wagger 2005; Barton 2002; McNair 2002; Liss et al. 2010; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Ekman 2013) also claim that "with the sexual and the sexist as closely intertwined as they are in our culture, it is difficult to assert what is truly freeing and what is subtly undermining a woman's long term happiness", which poses the question: how should a woman practice resistance to patriarchal ideologies (Barton 2002:200)? Are dancers, when playing with femininities, subscribing to ideals defined by the male gaze, or by a patriarchal mind-set that has been internalized? I am striving to understand what 'patriarchal ideologies' in the practice of stripping in Sandborg, beyond simplistic descriptions and being attentive to the fact that practices and symbols are always situated: they mean different things to different people in different times. In the study about contemporary notions of neo-burlesque, Nally (2009) takes as an example the use of the corset, that indeed represented the enactment of femininity, but "was not a monolithic unchanging experience that all unfortunate women experienced before being liberated by feminism" (Nally 2009:628).

Others (Frederickson & Roberts 1997 in their article about objectification theory as a framework for understanding the experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body, Liss et al. 2010 who problematize empowerment of American women obtained through sexuality) instead interpret women's femininity as a reiteration of the symbolic order of patriarchal ideologies, because they engage in self-objectification by subscribing to ideals of femininity as they have been constructed by the male gaze.¹⁷ Thus, in a similar view, when women find it powerful to be admired by the male gaze, they strengthen the hierarchy of women as sexual objects of

¹⁷ Fredrickson & Robert described 'self-objectification' as the process through which people internalize the external and from this judge themselves on the basis of their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Robert in Strelan et al. 2003).

which men are the users: in this reading women bear the final responsibility for the negative consequences of their objectification (Liss et al. 2010).

In trying to think through Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) and Liss et al. (2010) and given that my research focuses on female stripping, it is interesting to consider what happens to the dynamics when the costumers are also women. Would dancers engage in self-objectification by subscribing to feminine ideals as defined by the female gaze? If they enjoyed the positive reinforcement from other women, would they still be valued as sexual objects? Would this still be a case of patriarchal oppression, regardless of the gender of the audience? Not many scholars have discussed these matters, and those who did based their claims of gender biases: “the environment forces men into the role of selfish sexual dominance (...) while a woman looks at another woman not automatically in the same way” (Barton 2002:5). Also Young (1990), in one of the eight essays in which the author spans twenty-seven years of feminist theorising of embodiment: “In lesbian-dominated women’s spaces where women can be confident that the male gaze will not invade, I have found a unique experience of women’s bodies. (...) Such a context deobjectifies the breasts” (Young 1990:196). Which kind of imaginary would the female/lesbian audience like to see performed, and how much would this differ from the practices already enacted in ‘gentlemen’s strip clubs’? Dancers’ outfits, behaviours, styles of flirting and dancing change on a wide range of practices, and among those it is difficult to discern which ones are connected with the patriarchal imaginary, and therefore what an ‘alternative’ to them would look like.

Nevertheless, in my fieldwork, dancers *are not* looking for an alternative to the enacted ‘extra femininity’, but rather, they seem, within the club, to assume the feminine role deliberately. “Which means”, as Irigay (1977) writes in relation to a reconsideration of female sexuality in contexts relevant for feminist theory and practice, “already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it” (Irigay 1977:76). When a dancer plays with mimesis through ‘exaggerated’ behaviours and looks, she is a woman who “tries to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (Ibid.). For example, Miriam claims:

“I think that you like it because you like it. I think that the thought that you have internalised patriarchal imaginary...that thought is patriarchal! (...) You like it because you like it (...). No, no absolutely no! If you’ll work for some time more you’ll have it clear in your mind that that is not true. I can feel in my whole soul that I like it and I’m not brushing the hair of patriarchy!”

Is it also a feminist strategy to *not* necessarily have to find alternatives to normativized ideals of femininity, as Wutta and Miriam refuse to do? The question could also be rephrased: is it an option available to everyone to *not* seek alternative to certain modalities of being feminine, since not everyone can embody ‘excessive femininity’? Thus, another feminist challenge could be to deconstruct the factors that make certain ways of being feminine only embraceable by certain subjects (white, heterosexual, able-bodied, young women) and in certain places. I believe that signs of femininity can be universally reclaimed because nobody owns them, even when “these signs are abused in reality and embedded in a host pre-existing social relations and inequalities” (Frank 2002b:190). It is a feminist challenge to go beyond definitions of femininity, and remove from it specific, circumstantial practices that can ‘genderlessy’ be embodied by a wider range of subjectivities. Frank, referring to her experience as a stripper writes: “through dancing, I developed a *feminist ethos of femininity* that allows me to use the skills of performing gender to produce specific effects that differ according to context and my purposes. (...) Perhaps it is the ability to move among these and other options for womanhood that measures contemporary Western woman’s feelings of freedom” (Ibid.:183).

4.2.3. Playing Femininity through Class Performances

One of the biggest challenges to feminism in striptease is that the possibility of performing different femininities is inseparable from class: not all dancers can choose whether to enact the ‘high status escort’ or, alternatively, the ‘bohemian-slut’ looks. In Pasha and Honeymoon class differences among workers are not particularly noticeable in the differing quality of clothes or cosmetic products used; in fact, many dancers suggested to me: “*do not spend any money on expensive stuff here. It is too dark to notice differences, anyway.*” Class differences are instead made visible in the imaginary that dancers project, and through the image that they want to give of themselves. Different choices in terms of style in outfits, language, behaviours and appearance all contribute to become capital, and, as Bourdieu (1977) notes, this is likely to be transformed in class (lack of) privilege.

Historically, there is a reason why certain signs of femininity have been associated with sex workers. The general public viewed and still views stripping as a working-class profession (if it is even considered work) because it is a “professional dead end” that cannot be put on a CV, and it is often

thought of as a desperate professional choice, taken on because of a lack of other options (Frank 2002b). The embodied displays of femininity that are condemned as reiterations of patriarchal oppression are the least expensive ones, and are therefore, both culturally and financially, the ones most available to working-class women. These signs, such as evident makeup, an excess of hair styling products, long painted fingernails or high heels represent a failure in being 'properly attractive', because of a lack of ability in understanding what is excessive: they are considered 'trash', and not properly feminine. They become symbols of a raw approach to sexuality, as well as an 'excessive' sexuality: I believe that this point is crucial in reading the class dimension behind sexualisation of signs associated to working class femininity. This is also relevant for the present study to interpret the imaginary of the typical working class femininity that predominates in Pasha and Honeymoon: visually excessive, non-conformist to the reigning beauty standard of society, non-normativized physicalities, sexual in their approach to customers, porn dance and dirty talks. Images of class 'sold' by the two clubs are chosen for their conformity to the traditional gender stereotypes surrounding the demeanour, conventional style, and appearance of 'working class sluts' (Frank 2002b:197). This basically means that, at least within the strip club, social class enables (or hinders) a stripper's ability to do gender convincingly.

Indeed, the possibility of playing with femininities in relation to class is a class privilege in itself. In fact, discourses of femininity (and masculinity) can be used as cultural resources, carrying diverse amounts of symbolic capital in diverse spaces: and so there are forms of performances that are 'more privileged' than others. For instance, in Skeggs' (2002) ethnographic study on working class women in 1980 in the UK, it is claimed that black and working-class women cannot play with gender as freely as white and middle-class women, because any deviation made by the former is interpreted as a failure to enact femininity while when deviation is operated by the privileged is read instead as an act of revising or reshaping femininity. The same representations still exist today: working-class strippers make investments in the forms of femininity to which they *don't* have access, thus to the ideal of a 'sophisticated femininity', in order to avoid being labelled vulgar or overly sexual.

The crucial question at this point of the analysis is which dancers are able to perform such a working class femininity, which is the most lucrative one in Sandborg clubs. It can be addressed by taking into consideration Skeggs' theories (2004), that only certain classes have the privilege of choosing to enact other classes' belonging, because not all individuals "have the necessary economic and social capital that enables them to critique the cultural landscape they occupy" (Dodds 2013:84). Diverse relations to power in terms of class establish who can afford to play with given standards of

femininity, and so when they are associated with the working class we must ask, who is able to perform this role within the clubs? The working class role cannot be played by working class dancers, who instead strive for a 'more respectable' ideal of femininity and who hardly have "the necessary economic and social capital that enables them to critique the cultural landscape they occupy." (Ibid.) The consequence is that when working class dancers cannot successfully achieve femininity, respectability or even financial rewards (since the club promotes the image of the working class stripper which they do not access) they will displace their frustration onto those strippers who can play with class and embody working class femininity, that is the ones that have class privilege. This is expressed through the judgemental language that is also based on class issues: they 'look cheap', they are a 'bad advertisement' for the club, they look like 'whores'.

I noticed similar dynamics of discrimination against girls that do not have a normativized body shape; for example against Melissa, one of the first strippers I met in Pasha, who had a considerably heavier body than her colleagues. She told me about feeling uncomfortable in the space because some of her colleagues made her feel guilty when she made considerable amounts of money. She quit working a week later (though I am not sure that it was for that reason). Barton observed in her fieldwork in American strip clubs that bodies that do not conform to the beauty standard are more likely going to face discrimination from other dancers because of the belief that "the women who remove their G-strings when most of the performers remain covered tend to be those that are physically heavier in build" (Barton 2006:18-19). On this issue, Alex reported:

"I have sometimes heard both from girls something like 'oh, she is fat...she is ugly', but I think that it's about a girl being different and customers liking it. They [other workers] get jealous because (...) they have done so much fixing their bodies and they think that they are perfect; so 'I wasted so much time and money in fixing my body, why you [customers] do you not like me, because I am better!'"

These forms of harassments risk reinforcing the social stigma that affects strippers as a general category because stereotypes about strippers are taken into the club and then displaced onto other dancers. In fact, who cannot perform the working class role because coming from the working class itself takes distance from those colleagues that can play with class by considering them in opposition to an alleged image of the 'right stripper' and 'respectable' worker: "by 'othering' sex workers who do not conform to their [the working class dancers] standards of appropriate behaviour the stripper

reproduces in her own world what ‘morally correct’ does vis-à-vis the stripper world” (Barton 2006:85).

4.2.4. Nakedness in Relation to Sexualisation of the Stripped Body

Annelie denounced the current sexualisation dynamics thus: *“In this society young girls are encouraged to express their sexuality and, at the same time, they most definitely gonna be slut-shamed”* In fact, in contemporary Western society, there is a pervasive over-sexualisation of (female) bodies, and yet the public display of the sexualized body is not welcomed, at least in places where ‘respectability’ is required. It is the creation of ‘the forbidden sexual signs’, and to reveal them can be interpreted as a threat, if not an offensive behaviour or provocation; not casually, nakedness is a powerful tool in protests, as Alaimo (2010) explained in the essay asking how the naked body functions within naked protests occurring worldwide.

Nead (1997) explored the ways in which unacceptable images of the female body are produced in art and pornography and argues that the female nude has contingent values that are also circumstantial: it works both “as a sexual and a cultural category, but this is not simply a matter of content or some intrinsic meaning. (...) The nude is always organized into a particular cultural industry and thus circulates new definitions of class, gender and morality” (Nead 1997:326). Therefore, given that female naked bodies are simultaneously over-sexualized and forbidden in the mainstream socio-cultural context, and that the female nude represents a key cultural and sexual category in the sex industry of stripping, which practices associated with nakedness lead to particular forms of knowledge and pleasure within Pasha and Honeymoon? In every room of the clubs uncovered bodies of dancers are normalized: nakedness is a daily routine and taken for granted as a feature of the space.

Barthes (1975) studied Parisian female striptease and noticed that it is based on a contradiction: the woman is desexualised at the very moment when she is stripped naked because the show is based on fear: “the end of the striptease is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a *natural* vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh” (Barthes 1975:512). Another perspective was given by Spivey (2005), who through observations and interviews in a mid-

Atlantic strip bar in 2002, found that stripper's bodies are *desexualized* backstage. There, the author describes nudity as becoming a state of being, self-defined and voluntary: its meaning "becomes normative and liberating as dancers use this emotional sanctuary to reclaim the relationship to their physical bodies" (Spivey 2005:430). According to Spivey, only backstage are the workers' body parts no longer defined as sexual, because the normative limits that define what is socially rendered sexual are transgressed. Differently, in the club's public spaces nakedness is purchased by customers as a sexual product, nudity is neither voluntary nor self-defined, since dancers are not active in the process of guests' sexualisation of their bodies.

In Sandborg clubs I noticed both similar and different dynamics to the ones described by Barthes (1975) and Spivey (2005). In line with Spivey's assertion, in the changing rooms of Pasha and Honeymoon dancers hang around naked, showing each other their breast operations, genital piercings and epilation, thus desexualizing what is considered an 'intimate' body part. The normativization of nakedness backstage is perceived by many of my informants as an experience of relief; for instance, Lucia described her first impression of the atmosphere in the changing rooms, thus: *"Then I was there and everything felt nice. This felt like in a movie, everyone is so relaxed with themselves. Here it was not so sexual, but just an honest way of seeing each other. There, it felt quite nice! It was....cool!"* Differently to what Spivey describes, and similar to Barthes' claims, I observed that nakedness is also normalized *beyond* the backstage area, for instance on stage and in the other public spaces of the clubs. Alex reported that *"being naked there (in the club) is kind of normalised. Many guests have already been there before so they know, they do not react so much to it."* Here, she explained, customers get used to nudity, because most of them are regular visitors and they know the dancers' bodies so well. Within this the sexualized sign of the body is no longer forbidden, it becomes instead a familiar event: *"customers do not react so much to it"*.

Nevertheless, the fact that customers do not react does not mean the dancers' nudity is desexualized. In fact, one of the reasons why customers regularly visit Pasha and Honeymoon is to continually admire female bodies: the normalization of nakedness does not correspond to a complete annihilation of the erotic values ascribed to the female nude. When I asked customers why they visit strip clubs they commonly answered that it is because they like to watch beautiful naked women, as well as many other reasons, and for the pleasure of staying in a sexual environment.¹⁸ For this reason I

¹⁸ Among the other reasons: to talk to a specific dancer because 'she is so special': to escape from reality, to punish themselves with the guilt of being in 'a dirty place', to have fun, to meet other men, to sleep, to watch porn movies, to watch the dancing.

distance my own reading from Spivey's thought, having noticed that normalization of dancers' nakedness beyond the backstage area does *not* correspond to a process of desexualisation. How can the female nude be normalized and yet *not* desexualized?

Sexuality was a dominant issue in the talks with my informants and colleagues: *"I just liked the feeling...acknowledging my sexuality and yeah I've enjoyed it from the start and still now, I still love it. Yeah, it is about sexuality."* One way of interpreting these common references to sexuality in dancers' experiences is that in the practice of striptease, as it is perceived by strippers, there is a strong desire to have their bodies recognized as sources of sexual energy, and this made me wonder how sexuality becomes a key element in the process of identity construction, or subjectivation. Caroline told me that she had always felt in need of expressing her sexuality through her body, and discussed the problems she encountered when she did this outside the club.

"Before I started to working with this I was seeking attentions a lot, in private. Maybe I would go to nightclubs and dance extra sexy and dress extra sexy to get attention, and all this stuff. Then I started working here and I got more confident because you get a lot of compliments, it really boosts your confidence. I started to get more relaxed in my private life."

In a way, her needs were satisfyingly met when she started stripping, by having her naked body recognized as 'sexy': *"I love the attention and I love it extra when I see I make them excited, I do not care who sit there. They get excited watching me. (...) It's because they make you feel sexy, their attention, to know that these men can get attracted to you just by watching you dancing."* It seems that striptease for the dancer is about trying to subjectivize 'the self' by carrying the implicit request of having a recognized sexual identity and body, which is perceived as a constitutive feature of the self.

For Carmen it is also a political desire to resist phallogentric society (*"it is like celebrating the pussy!"*) and historical demoralization of female bodies (*"Men always wanted to control women's sexuality. Sexuality is of the men not of the woman. 'Com'on, you can't own your own sexuality, woman!'"*). Weiss (1999), who discussed embodiment in phenomenology and feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial and queer theories to understand what the role of the body image is in the contemporary society, has argued that one of the "ways that bodies have historically been demoralized (...) is precisely through their exclusion from the 'exalted' domain of morality" (Weiss 1999:141). Thus

striptease is understood by some dancers, like Carmen, as being able to deconstruct female bodies' exclusion and attack the double standard that is applied when looking at a nude female (rather than a male nude) in a public space. Lucia denounced such a double standard, beyond which the demoralization of the female nude is evident:

"I think it would be so nice if we could look at the female body and we could see it in a neutral way (...). For instance, if a man shows his penis, people would be like: 'Wow, this is so fun', but if a woman does the same the reactions will be: 'Oh, she's a whore!' If a woman chooses to show her pussy, why can't we be simply like: 'Oh, great fun!'"

My informants experience the routine of walking around and dancing naked as an affirmation of the (female) body: "in embracing public nudity, the exposure leads to affirmation, which then produces feelings of worth" (Barton 2006:83). As Didi reported: *"I always liked to show my body, always. (...) I have a good body, hell! I think that everybody that has a body should show off! Enjoy it, I mean!"* Similarly, Caroline asserts: *"I do it here (in the club); I can walk around fully naked! I and do it at home also, when I meet guys I walk around home all time because I just love being naked! (...) It just feels natural."*

Why are such external (sexual) attentions given to the stripped body (both by customers and other dancers) perceived as affirmations of it? One hypothesis is that it is because the stripped body is not viewed within a constricted site of corporeal ideals, but instead within recognition of the dancer's position as a sexual creature, recognition mutually established between dancer and customers. Following this interpretation, sexualisation in stripping is not a process imposed on passive dancers from active audiences, but it is rather *a process of negotiation* between the two parts. As Alaimo (2010) wrote referring to naked protests, and I report in relation to striptease, "it is possible to imagine that the exposed flesh may embody an ethical recognition that arises from a sense of humans as inescapably woven into a trans-corporeal, material realm" (Alaimo 2010:15). Thus, it is the *ethical* recognition of the female nude that is actively demanded by the dancer and confirmed by the customer. In this interpretation nakedness is normalized, and the "exposed flesh" is consensually re-sexualized (Ibid.). Thus, the act of stripping corresponds to a process of subjectivation through recognition of the dancer's sexuality, a process of transformation that the stripper operates together with the audience; Alex: *"I like the power. They [costumers] come there to see me, they like what they see and they keep coming. (...)*

It's because they make you feel sexy, their (the guests') attention. (...) I feel sexy, sensual."¹⁹

This form of sexualisation of the female nude (re-)negotiated within the club differs from the one circulating in the rest of the society, because it is the fruit of a dialogue between two parts, the dancer who 'is looked at' and the audience, who 'look at'. In the wider societal context however, the sexualisation of women's bodies is usually non-consensual: teachers, nurses, and nuns are typically protagonists in pornography because their professional task is not related to being sexual subjects - as sex workers instead are - thus they are susceptible to being passively turned into sexual objects. Their state of not being sexually available when conducting their profession make them 'objectifiable' because they are then turned into sexual beings against their will; they are passive in the sexualisation process, and eventually become victims of it. Since their sexualisation is externally imposed, the resulting recognized sexuality of the person who is turned into a sexual object will most likely not correspond to the victim's own presentation as a (non-)sexual subject.

Instead, strippers fight against a passive sexualisation imposed by the men who look at them, by demanding recognition as sexual *subjects*. They take an active role in determining which kind of sexuality they want to see reflected in their recognition given by 'The Other'; in fact, Alex said: "*I like the power*" in relation to "*they [costumers] make you feel sexy*". This active role is possible because the space prevents a forced sexualisation being imposed from the outside, though admittedly this relies on specific working conditions being met and also depends on which privileged or non-privileged position a dancer is in.²⁰ For instance, are workers free to decide which customers they want to deal and with which they do not? Are dancers forced to get completely naked on stage? How much power do they have in dealing with the guests and how much freedom do they have to present themselves as they want?

¹⁹ A fruitful follow-up discussion could be why dancers demand re-sexualisation *beyond* the backstage area and not *within* it. Unfortunately, I leave such a research question for future works, and here I merely hypothesize that it is because Sandborg clubs are quite heterosexual, and the significant Other is not found in the female co-workers.

²⁰ Many commercial sex providers do not have the option to be discriminating, but those who experience the most benefits and earn the most money are usually the most privileged. Another dilemma is that the worker's right to arbitrarily select customers and services might correspond to discrimination against the customer. In my fieldwork and personal experiences I noticed several episodes of discrimination, mostly on the grounds of racialization and disability: for instance, dancers often ignore Indian customers because they supposedly 'never buy anything'. The opportunity for workers' to select customers and services to sell is one of the fundamental requests of sex workers as individuals and as organizations: "It is essential that prostitutes can provide their services under the conditions that are absolutely determined by themselves and no one else." (ICPR, 1985: section: Working conditions) "We demand the right to say no to any client or any service requested." (European Conference on Sex Work, 2005:11) Such a freedom might coincide though with the customer being discriminated against on the basis of disability, transgender identity or expression, sex, class, sexual orientation, age, race, religion or other belief systems.

Ultimately, the interpretation of striptease as normalizing nakedness and re-sexualizing subjects is only one of the many possible interpretations of the practice. For instance, in this study I could not account for how much the audience perceive dancers' messages about nakedness and re-sexualisation. It is also possible that stripping does not re-sexualize dancers in the way they want, or that the dancers' dependency on recognition from the male gaze renders them, again, subordinated subjects. In line with this, other studies (Whitehead & Kurts 2009, who made a feminist post-structuralist analysis of the recreational activity of pole dance fitness; Strelan et al. 2003 who investigated the interrelationships between self-objectification, reasons for exercise, body satisfaction, body esteem, and self-esteem) have claimed that workers' descriptions of their experiences on stage as liberating are only valid on an individual level, while the practice of stripping more broadly reinforces covert oppression on women's bodies on a societal level. The suggestion is therefore that third wave feminist and post-feminist notions of sexual empowerment are the same traditional forces of oppression, merely sold in a different way.

Therefore, the idea that in the clubs there are 'inverted norms' in comparison to hegemonic ones is contextual and it is open to different interpretations. This triggers a final question: can strip clubs really be understood as 'experimental boxes' in which the subjectivation process is stimulated by the 'alternative' discourses that are reshaped through the practice of striptease itself?

4.2.5. Intimacy: “*You Set Different Rules for Yourself*”

After having worked for couple of months, I started noticing that I became considerably stressed when customers touched my hair: it made me feel deeply frustrated. I wondered why I could comfortably rip off my clothes in front of an audience and have quite intimate contact with the bodies of my customers during private dances, but then *could not stand* them touching my hair. With time, this feeling intensified and now I always insist that guests absolutely do not touch my hair, this is my main rule. I also found some explanation for this: going back in my life, hair had always been part of my intimacy with my dad, who was hardly ever at home and usually only present late in the evening. One of the few daily routines we shared was when he used to comb my hair every night, before going to sleep: it was a wonderful physical feeling, and I found it fun that he spent so much time combing my hair even when it was completely detangled (my firm belief was that he kept brushing my hair for such a long time

only because he was unable to understand when it was brushed enough!). This process of self-understanding led me to question intimacy, and how for me the concept relates to different body parts. This thinking subjectivized me, because I came up with explanations related to other episodes of my life, for instance my political irreverence in not wanting to cover my breasts, and my fascination with long hair.

Subjectivation processes in striptease are, also, triggered by the experience of stripping one's own body in public, being 'looked at' and touched in an environment where these actions are normalized: which redefinitions of bodily intimacy occur? I hypothesise that, as the process of re-sexualisation is done by dancers themselves in relation to their customers, also intimacy is personally revisited in relation to external factors. Accessibility of a dancers' body is in fact proportional to the financial possibility of the customers, besides being dependent on the dancer's willingness to undress and on the club's rules about how much dancers should undress given a certain amount of money. A personal reconstruction of the concept of one's own body accessibly can hardly happen if the club forces workers to get completely naked, to be touched if the customer pays 'enough', if there is no freedom of refusing to provide certain services and if prices are fixed by the club.

Accessibility in relation to money does not mean that money can buy everything, but that a stripper's general rule is 'if you want to see more, you have to pay more'. A dancer's willingness not only to reveal more, but also to be touched more, and to see the dancer touching herself more (in peep shows) can change during their time spent in the business. With time, I have observed, dancers take on a personal redefinition of what bodily intimacy means, as I did with my hair. As Miriam explains, 'limits' change with the time, and according to the occasions:

"With the time you set different rules for yourself. Few years ago I did not want to do lap dance, let them touch me or whatever. But then I thought: 'do I get damaged in my brain because they touch my breast? No, I don't!' (...) So I think I can do that! (...) But I still have rules."

In this paper I am *not* going to go deeper into the question of whether pushing the limit is a rational and conscious choice, or whether it comes from dancers' agency or from external systems that influence them (like financial needs) even if this is indeed an interesting question. This is because my study aims to ask strippers what conclusions their experiences of stripping signified for them in terms of

transformation, what I find relevant in Miriam's words is the redefinition of her own body: after working for a while, she set new, personal boundaries for her body being touched.

Merely by being a stripper and having to dance on stage with very small underwear, one necessarily has to move beyond the conventional standard of bodily accessibility, but within the club dancers re-set their own *subjective* standards too. A personal challenge to the standards of bodily accessibility therefore leads to new definitions of intimacy: it poses the question, which body parts and behaviours are 'too intimate' to be shared with strangers, in front of a public audience or/and for money? In a way, what Miriam and I did potentially consists of an act of fighting against imposed sexualisation of women's bodies: a dancer does not *learn, is not told* which parts of her body are accessible or not, a dancer *decides* this on her own (for different reasons), unmasking the modern illusion of fixed definitions of intimacy related to body parts and contact. Miriam concluded that customers can access her breasts because she does not perceive them as something that must be hidden or protected (in fact, why do female breasts have to be covered in public spaces?). I concluded that my hair are too intimate to be touched by strangers.

Consequently, what is the audience's understanding of such transformations in definitions of intimacy? An interesting hypothesis is the one configured in Pendleton's analysis (1999), according to which the payment that the sex worker requires is interpreted exactly as the element that makes the customer challenge their ideas about female body's accessibility and intimacy. The author writes "the act of making men pay is, in fact, quite subversive. It reverses the terms under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women's bodies" (Pendleton 1999:79). Other authors, instead, would claim the opposite (Ekman 2013; McNair 2002; Liss et al. 2013): this matter has been a key battleground for the feminist sex war.

Moreover, how much does a dancer care of how the customer thinks of her body's accessibility? One Saturday afternoon Nalisha went into a private room with a customer for a lap dance. She came out after three minutes, and revealed to me all her frustration in dealing with "*this kind of customer*" who insistently grabs dancers around their hip. After a couple of minutes a new customer came in, Johnathan, one I knew to be a regular of Nalisha's. She stood up and went towards him to welcome him in. Johnathan definitely grabbed her around her hip and started talking to her, yet she gave no signals of anger, or irritation. Nalisha explained to me that her different reactions toward other people touching her skin are contextual and it basically depends on two circumstances: if she likes the customer and if the customer is willing to pay: "*a guest cannot just come in for the first time, pay only*

five-hundred and pretend to put his hands on my skin. This is disgusting.” Bodily intimacy does not depend, in Nalisha’s case, on what a customer thinks about touching her body (whether it is sexual, or is perceived as intimate, or if her body is taken as possession), but what counts is the deal that the dancer establishes before the dance: how much you can do, and for how much money. If bodily intimacy is for Nalisha, within the club, a matter of arranging a deal, how does this influence her general re-definition of intimacy *outside* the working environment?

5. FINAL REFLECTIONS

The principal aim of this study has been to reflect on the hypothesis that striptease is a practice of transformation that resists normativized ways of thinking through sexuality, femininity and bodies, creating new narratives alternative to the enduring and abiding discourses. The reason these changes are particularly addressed in strip clubs is that such sites offer “inversions of the everyday world” (Regehr 2011:142). In fact, exotic night clubs can be seen as ‘experimental boxes’ because they represent fiction by breaking standards of ‘properness and therefore enabling alternative normative orders. On the other hand though, their being segregated, their honest approach to sexuality, and all the ‘naked’ emotions circulating in the space mean that they are perceived as even more ‘real’ than society outside. This mix of unreality and tangibility creates the necessary conditions for dancers to feel able to experiment/challenge/play with the self, thereby releasing the responsibilities of being accountable (and respectable).

The experience of exotic dancing is not a smooth process because it requires its participants to revise deeply rooted orders of norms, as Lucia expressed:

“It is the moral you have been reminded, some ideas are just part of you, like your own hair. If you want to take it away from you would be painful. Imagine yourself ripping your hair off. (...) You could do it, but go and do it: it is a pretty hard job. (...) They are the ideas that you grow up with, the things that made your family suffer, even if you think that they are not true, they still affect you!”

Throughout the various sections of the second part of the analysis’ chapter I have analysed how different narratives of transformation inform the process of subjectivation through which strippers experiment/challenge/express/struggle with ‘the self’.

In the section 4.2.1., strip clubs are presented as environments where dancers feel less bound to respect the same standards of ‘respectability’ that root discrimination against them, and can therefore subjectivize themselves by expressing and exploring their sexuality(-ies). At the same time, sexual

expression is still codified within standards of respectability because strippers have misrecognized identities that do not allow them to reclaim alternative sources of symbolic values. Exotic dancers are therefore subjectivities with alternative approaches to sexuality that transgress social expectations, but they do not fully manage to dissociate themselves from the dominant standards of respectability. In the section 4.2.2., I questioned how narratives about femininity are renegotiated within Sandborg strip clubs. Dancers undertake a subjectivation process because by embodying different feminine identities they can experiment with presenting themselves in various roles. This leads to doubts about whether the gratification offered by the replication of traditional femininities might imply an active subscription to patriarchal female ideals, in which case the process of subjectivation would be following sexist routes. An alternative (and maybe compatible) hypothesis is that dancers illuminate the performative nature of femininity, by exaggerating the codes of patriarchal femininity. In the section 4.2.3., the discussion centres on how diverse relations to power, particularly in terms of class, determine who can afford to play with femininities and therefore subjectivize themselves. Through the example of who can embody a working class femininity characterized by ‘excesses’ (which is the most successful image in Pasha and Honeymoon) it becomes apparent how the most privileged classes have more possibilities of subjectivizing themselves because they have access to a wider range of transformations. In the section 4.2.4 I unravelled how the female nude is normalized within the club and then re-sexualized. The process of re-sexualisation is a key step in dancers’ subjectivation because their self-perception as ‘sexual beings’ gets socially recognized. Nevertheless, whatever agency dancers and customers *think* they have in this process of re-sexualisation, it remains an open question: who is demanding and giving what? A similar process of transformation *through* the re-construction of symbolic values can be applied to the concept of ‘intimacy’, as discussed in the section 4.2.5. In Pasha and Honeymoon the dominant definition of bodily intimacy is challenged because it is substituted by the more personal and therefore subjectivizing idea that each dancer has about which parts of their bodies are (also economically) accessible. I think it would be relevant in future research to discuss transformations within the concept of intimacy, meant in a wider sense than ‘bodily’ intimacy.

As it is visible in the cases previously described about sexuality, femininity, nakedness and intimacy, dancers revise traditional narratives associated to those matters and experiment their ‘being subjects’ both in the process of transformation and as a consequence of it. At the same time, transformations are always partial, because dominant systems of values are not completely deconstructed, but merely

displaced and personalized. One of the factors that impede a more radical deconstruction of norms within striptease practices is that it is difficult to assess how this process of subjectivation is perceived beyond the dancers' microcosm. It depends on how much customers do understand of dancers' post-feminist statements about their choosing to masquerade as sex objects in order to deconstruct narratives that demoralize female bodies and their sexuality. It is possible that the audience is not aware of this meaning of the performance and still "hold very normative views about gender roles", thereby continuing to look at strippers as non-aware sex objects (Frank 2002b:200). Since this study has mostly problematized how transformation is implicated in dancers' subjectivities, and not how the audience experiences transformation, a follow-up exploration could be to look at how customers' understandings of striptease influence the process of dancers' reclamation of a resistant, heedful, and expressive exotic dance.

Furthermore, which wider transformations does striptease enable, beyond the 'abnormal' and segregated social "*world of fantasies*" that the club is? Can both the embodied experiences and performed knowledge of 'various identities' experimented within the club, and the performative subjects' revision of hegemonic meanings, possibly reach "beyond the theatricalized space into performers' and spectators' wider social existence" (Dodds 1997:86)? In posing this question I am actually being curious if striptease can be a 'performative politics' (Butler 1997a) that grounds a post-structuralist discourse of change by restructuring hegemonic orders of norms. I am trying to imagine what strippers would look like as performative subjects engaging in a subjectivating and deconstructive politics that unsettle patriarchal narratives beyond the purple curtains of the club. The strip club, with its upside-down system of norms, is an *uncomfortable* environment that puts its participants in an unstable, ambiguous and pluralistic position from which transformations are inescapable, while moving toward what Anzaldúa (1987), when discussing forms of invisible borders between opposing groups, defines as "consciousness of the Borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987:101). Maybe, this is the space where the potential of striptease's performative politics of taking subjectivation beyond dancers' lived experiences can be concretized.

What currently hinders striptease from deploying its *potential* of transformation? One hypothesis is that the practice of striptease is concretely situated in places with regulations and routines that impede wider and deeper transformations. Another possibility is that the identity of the stripper is still too misrecognized to allow for dancers' subjective transformations to reach a wider discussion that transcends individuality. Could the striptease potential of transformation be enhanced by undemonizing

access to exotic dance bars? Would a collective transformation of symbolic values be facilitated if more people with different bodies could ‘take part’ of the social world of stripping, both as performers and audience members? In order to be able to answer these curiosities, preliminary research is needed into whether it is necessary to *physically experience* strip clubs in order to be involved in the dynamics of transformation, or if, on the other hand, striptease can be used as a mere intellectual tool to critically think through norms.

Whichever answer one personally comes to, both *experiencing* striptease and *thinking through* it requires visualizing the practice of exotic dancing in its practical and real contexts, in order to develop knowledge beyond the prejudice. As Garofalo (2014) hypothesizes, the rationale of the stigma of sex work is the fact that it is a potential challenge to our society because of its subversive potential. Therefore, in order to unravel striptease’s potential for resistance, stigma must first be overcome. Expertise on stripping is rooted in the field and in the lived experiences of those who take part of it: let’s find ways of making politics *in and from* the material of *life*! I perceive this method as one of my main values as a feminist. This is an invitation for sex workers to speak of their experiences because “when we talk about our own ‘tactical deployments of femininity’, we make personal stories available for others to draw on”, towards the development of feminist consciousness (Frank 2002:206). It is also an invitation for academia to be humble enough to become a student of the expertise from the field; it is the invitation that Lerum (1999) addresses to the condescending medical understanding of sex work that dehumanizes it: “so, if your vision is to enhance rather than degrade the status of sex workers, wear a pair of frames that allows a sex worker to look you in the eye” (Lerum 1999:34).

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